POCKET BOOK
663

He called their bluff
with a pair of smoking sixes.

Renegade Ranch

ROY MANNING

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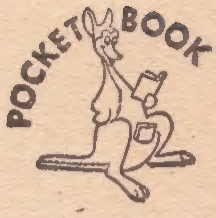

Lefty Lingren's father was murdered. Then the bank was robbed and Lefty was accused of both crimes. Someone was playing a stacked deck against him. But before that someone could rake in the winning chips, Lefty did some conniving of his own. And the answer he came up with sparked the fuse for a shotgun showdown!

ROY MANNING

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Renegade Ranch

Chapter 1

LEFTY LINGREN was playing a dead man's hand and the cards were stacked against him.

Bellied amongst the boulders that littered the sun-scoured canyon, he squinted along the hot barrel of his Winchester towards a puff of powder smoke that smudged the clear mountain air ahead. Behind him, flies swarmed thick around the body of his dun pony, sprawled across the winding trail. A gun barked from the ridge on his flank and the whining slug chipped splinters from the fragment of rock beside which his stocky form was stretched. Another bullet, from up-canyon, droned past his right ear. Lefty grunted, squeezed the trigger, levered. Another empty shell tinkled on to the sandy earth.

It had been like this for an hour—a hopeless fight against ghost gunmen, except for the hombre he had cut down on the mesquite slope to his right . . . and his shells were running short.

Lefty squirmed closer to the boulder that protected his flank. Pretty soon, he figured, even that sparse cover wouldn't be worth an adobe dollar. The jasper on the ridge was working behind him, fast, while the two gunnies up-canyon held him down—as helpless as a beetle pinned to a board. The Pearly Gates were looming mighty close.

Except for the spasmodic gunfire that ripped the heat-laden air, there was little to indicate that a man was cornered and counted the minutes that ticked off his life in

that arid canyon deep in the Bad Lands. Close by, a demure canyon wren hopped pertly from branch to branch of a stunted mountain laurel. Little horned toads darted between the rocks. A buzzard circled sluggishly over the ridge.

With his left hand, Lefty fingered the slack loops of his cartridge belt. His lips twisted into a mirthless grin as he finally laid out seven shells, side by side, in a neat row by his gun barrel. There weren't any more!

Again the invisible gun on his left—farther back now—barked viciously. Something wrenched at his boot heel, almost rolled him over. Lefty squirmed back against the boulder and cursed softly. If he twisted around to return the fire, the jaspers ahead would plug him. Yet, if he didn't stop that persistent hornet on the hill, he'd be cold meat before he loosed those last seven shells. It sure was a hell of a homecoming.

He lifted his head a bare two inches. His blue eyes slewed around as he swiftly figured chances. He'd been in jackpots aplenty, but never one as tight as this. He ducked as hot lead streaked close.

Again, a shot crackled from his flank. Lefty's muscles tensed against the impact of lead, although the bullet had already ricocheted, screaming, above his broad back, before the report hit his ears. A trifle high—next time maybe!

A deeper, heavier boom reverberated from the ridge. The cornered rider's ears pricked. Another! That made four hombres plunking lead into his nest of rocks.

Then, for the first time in an age, it seemed to the sweat-soaked Lefty, there was a lull in the gunfire. Silence settled on the canyon like a shroud—a silence prickled with vague foreboding. Minutes dragged. Lefty scanned the canyon beneath the brim of his Stetson, alert for movement.

Another heavy boom from the ridge—ahead now!

Broad forehead puckered with puzzlement, Lefty raised a dust-grimed cheek from the stock of his gun, glimpsed two grey-shirted figures ahead dodging between boulders in frantic retreat. His Winchester spat fire. A running rider stumbled, recovered, staggered on the heels of his companion. Then both men disappeared behind a shoulder of the ridge.

Lefty grabbed his loose shells and jumped to his feet. Twisting like a jackrabbit, bent low, he pounded down-canyon in pursuit. As he panted along, he wondered dimly why no lead droned from the persistent gun on the ridge.

Chest heaving, sweat furrowing down his begrimed forehead, he rounded the obstructing shoulder. Before him stretched a flat expanse, bordered by low hills and sprinkled with thorny mesquite. Across the flat two riders pounded; one slumped low, grabbing leather. Two loose ponies, stirrups swinging, reins streaming, circled aimlessly.

Lefty steadied, leveled his Winchester, lowered it reluctantly—he couldn't afford to waste lead. One of the riderless ponies suddenly jerked to a halt, reins snagged in the brush. With a grunt of satisfaction, Lefty plodded clumsily in his high-heeled boots through the mesquite. The two fugitives had disappeared from view down a draw.

Questions buzzed in his brain. Where did the hombres hail from? Why had two suddenly turned tail like a brace of coyotes? Why were they hell-bent upon wiping him out?

Forking one pony and leading another, he jogged back down the canyon. There was still a gunnie somewhere on the ridge, but there was also a good McClellan saddle cinched to the dead pony up-trail.

He halted and stepped down beside the stiffening remains of his mount. His eyes softened as he gently

loosened the latigos and yanked the saddle clear. "I gotta leave you to the buzzards, Butch," he muttered. "Wasn't a better little horse north of the Rio Grande. Wal, you got company in the Happy Hunting Grounds —I sure got one of the lousy sidewinders."

The rattle of loose shale down the winding trail jerked him upright. He whirled, left hand dropping to the swiveled six-gun on his hip. Half-crouched, he waited. A spare, blue-shirted figure shuffled into view. Earth-stained pants, well patched, were stuffed into the stranger's knee boots. A shabby vest hung loose from his shoulders. Under his right arm he cradled a Sharp's buffalo gun. His weather-eroded features, sharp as a hatchet, were clean-shaven. Deep-set beneath sun-bleached eyebrows, his eyes, keen and restless as a ferret's, focused Lefty's crouched form from beneath the brim of a battered Stetson. Behind him ambled a burro, its kiacks covered with a spread of discolored canvas.

Lefty's eyes slanted down to the buffalo gun. "You in action on the ridge?" he queried, as the prospector drew close.

"Ef I warn't, you'd be worm feed, young feller," snapped the stranger irascibly.

"I guess you're right," returned the rider. "I'm thanking you, mister."

The peppery little man stopped, fished a chunk of chewing tobacco from a pocket of his hanging vest and deftly bit off a chew.

"Glad tuh oblige," he returned more amiably. "Betsy and me was moseyin' along peaceful when we hears gunfire. I legged it up the ridge tuh take a look-see. Figgered I'd whittle down th' odds a mite. Guess I did." As he spoke, his button eyes flicked over the rider's dusty garb. "You ain't a lawman, by happenchance?"

Lefty smiled slowly. "Nope, I sure am not. Jest drifted up from the Border." He took a quick step for-

ward. His hand came up, pointing. "B'gosh, there's a rat—under your vest."

The prospector chuckled. "Thet's no rat, thet's old Dan's pardner. Cummon up, Blinky!" He pursed his thin lips, whistled. A grey chipmunk scurried up his shirt, over his chest and perched upon his shoulder, watching the rider with alert beady eyes.

Lefty leaned forward to fondle the little bundle of fur. The chipmunk squeaked shrilly.

"Lay off!" warned the prospector. "Blinky ain't a friendly cuss and his bite is plumb pison." His jaws champed on the chew reflectively. "Them jaspers was shore conniving tuh wipe yuh out. Feud, mebbe?"

Lefty shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine, mister. I haven't been around Eagle Valley for eight-nine years. They call me Lefty."

"Not Lefty Lingren!" snapped the prospector.

"The same."

"Sufferin' polecats!" ejaculated the little man. His spare frame stiffened, thin lips compressed. "And I hadda butt in like an addle-brained jackass!" He swung away in disgust, addressed the burro. "Kin yuh beat it! Me, easin' a dogblasted Lingren outa a tight! Le's go, Betsy!"

Without another glance at the frowning Lefty, he headed down-canyon, as stiff-legged as an outraged rooster, the chipmunk perched on his shoulder and the burro placidly trotting behind.

The old spread hadn't changed a mite, mused Lefty, checking the rangy claybank he straddled, as he emerged through a break in the hills and the Circle L stood limned against the setting sun. Slowly building a smoke, he eyed the cluster of buildings, set upon a bare bench against the somber background of the frowning Apaches. And it sure reflected Paw's make-up—grim

and unyielding as the gloomy mesas and stark peaks that rose high behind it.

Squat-built and massive, like a fort, the long low, timber-and-adobe ranch house seemed welded to the ground. Behind it were grouped bunkhouse, barns and corrals, all greyed by the years. To one side, a windmill was poised on gaunt legs. Around, foothills rolled away towards the mountains. A voiceless challenge seemed to emanate from the lonely ranch house, as though time had imbued it with the stubborn spirit of Lobo Lingren, his father.

Lefty crushed his smoke against the horn, kneed the claybank, jerked the lead rope of the pony with its burden of death and headed across the valley.

No cheery hail welcomed him when he rounded the house and jogged across a hoof-chopped yard. Ahead, a pole corral was set, fronted by a water trough. Talk cascaded from a long lean-to built against the bunkhouse to his right. The crew was at supper, he guessed, as he swung out of leather by the trough. He watered the two ponies, knotted their reins around a cross-pole of the corral and stepped towards the house.

The kitchen door was ajar. Lefty pushed it open with his boot and stepped inside. A slim girl, in crisp striped gingham, was busy at the stove.

"Wal, if it isn't little Al!" he drawled. "And hasn't she changed. Danged if she hasn't even got to be good-looking since Con and I pulled out. Long skirts 'n' everything!"

The girl spun around, a dish of smoking doughnuts in one hand.

Thumbs hooked in his gunbelt, Lefty lounged against the door jamb, eyeing her critically. His thoughts drifted back to the night when a bunch of Circle L punchers had ridden in behind his father, one cradling a little girl's trembling form on a crooked arm. His father

had smoked out a nester family on Sandy Creek and a rider had stumbled over the mite, cowering in the brush. Her parents' scorched remains lay amid the embers of their cabin.

Lobo Lingren had entered the house and carelessly handed the orphan to his wife: "Maw, you was alwus dead set on a gal. Now yuh got one. Guess there's no one left tuh stake a claim on her."

Maw was as warm-hearted as Paw was rock-hewn. She lavished her love on the big-eyed, brown-haired little orphan, and Alice Bradford had grown up with the Lingren boys—a graceful fawn among three husky mavericks. A right pretty gal, too, considered Lefty. The spindly-legged, pigtailed orphan had crystallized into a graceful, grave-eyed young woman, with thick strands of brown hair neatly coiled around a proudly-poised head, sun-tanned oval features and a pert nose which a powdering of freckles somehow seemed to make more attractive.

"You haven't changed much." A quick smile lighted the girl's features. In repose, her face was placid, almost resigned, as though the tragedy of long ago still cast a shadow over her life. "Just as impertinent as ever," she added, her cheeks dimpling. "Paw's in the office."

"I gambled Lobo hasn't changed any," chuckled Lefty. "Still snortin' fire and brimstone?"

Alice waved towards the door. "Scared to find out?" she mocked.

The rider straightened, jingled across the kitchen, grabbed a doughnut as he passed. Munching it, he strode down a passage, on both sides of which doors opened. Ahead, yellow lamplight streamed from a small room at the end of the passage. Biting on the doughnut, Lefty strolled in.

The room served as ranch office. Furnishings were confined to a dusty roll-top desk and scattered straight-

back chairs. From a peg on the wall dangled a gunbelt, creased and blackened with age, the protruding butt of the forty-five worn smooth. In a swivel chair before the desk hunched the blocky figure of a cowman in hickory shirt and levis.

At sound of Lefty's tinkling spur chains, he swung around. His blue eyes, hard and unwinking as twin glass beads, focused on the young rider's trail-stained form. With an easy nod, his youngest son jackknifed into a chair, swallowed the last fragment of doughnut and fished out the makin's.

Lobo Lingren's features were the hue of seasoned mahogany. His deep, heavy jaw was stubbled with grey. Wide open, his shirt revealed a barrel chest, thick with hair. Square forehead furrowed, he continued to stare silently at his prodigal son.

With careless unconcern, Lefty built a smoke. His father finally broke the silence. "Whar you been these eight summers?" he rumbled.

Lefty waved a careless hand. "Jest driftin' around."

"Two jumps ahead of a posse?"

"Nope," grinned the younger man. "My picture hasn't decorated any dodgers—yet."

"And I gamble yuh ain't got a adobe dollar tuh show for yore hell-raisin'."

Lefty wordlessly unbuckled his cartridge belt, pulled open his shirt and patted a broad money belt that bulged around his white torso. "Double eagles!" he commented curtly. "Now quit stallin', Paw. Why did you stick that notice, 'Lefty and Conrad Lingren, you're wanted at home,' in every doggoned sheet along the Border? You don't 'pear exactly helpless and it sure sounded like a full crew in the chuck shack."

The older man said nothing. Heavy features granite-like, he probed the young rider with bleak eyes, slowly

rasping the stiff stubble on his chin with big, blunt fingers.

Metal tinkled down the passageway. Lefty's head turned as a big, heavy-shouldered rider, belly sagging over a broad gunbelt, slouched in.

"Howdy, George!" he greeted affably.

The newcomer grunted, plumped heavily into a chair.

Broad foreheads, blue eyes and heavy jaws stamped the three as blood kin, but there the resemblance ended. George Lingren, unshaven, running to fat, was as slow-moving as a heavy steer. The skin pouched beneath his eyes, his lips were too heavy and too loose. He met his father's disapproving stare belligerently, then his eyes slanted away.

There was not a weak spot or a laughter wrinkle on the Circle L owner's rough-hewn face, from bleak blue eyes to uncompromising jaw.

Lefty was molded along his father's lines, save for the humorous quirk at the corners of his wide mouth and a quick alertness in his eyes.

"Light a shuck, George," rasped the Circle L owner.

"Guess I got the right—" began the eldest son, then he met the cowman's cold stare. Muttering, he heaved out of the chair and lumbered into the passageway.

"I'm still waitin'," reminded the irrepressible Lefty.

"My pump's turned ornery, son. Doc Caldwell figgers I'm due tuh check out—any time." The older man's deep voice was emotionless. "I need yuh—tuh carry on."

"You got George around."

"That drunken saddle-bum! He ain't wuth a hoot," his father snorted.

"And Conrad."

"Ain't seen hair nor hide of the colt since he pulled out with you." The cowman leaned forward; his voice deepened. "Listen, son, I done built the biggest spread east of the Apaches, 'cepting the Lazy J. There ain't a

hombre in the Valley but hates my guts. For why? They all carry Lobo's scars. I've fought 'em f'r thirty years, fought 'em tooth and nail. Right now, they're ringin' me, waitin' f'r the kill—the Boxed R, the Lazy J, the Triple S. When I cash in they'll rip inter this spread like a pack of coyotes tears inter a stray calf. There ain't another Lingren kin hold it, Lefty, 'cept you. Mebbe we never seed eye t' eye, but you got savvy and you got guts. I've give my life tuh build this spread, son. Stick around!"

He paused, sank back in his chair.

Lefty eyed his cigarette, pondering. The old man had never softened up like this before. Looked like the doc had scared him plenty.

"And if I stick around?" he queried, at last.

"I'm willing you every cow, every square mile of land, every dollar I got," rumbled the cowman; his voice hardened. "But I ain't tying the Circle L to no tumbleweed. You marry Al, that'll hobble yuh—and yuh take over."

"And if I'm not ready to—be hobbled?"

"Yuh kin go tuh the devil f'r all I care," rasped the old cowman harshly.

Lefty grinned and rose, stood balanced on long legs.

"Wal, if that's what I rode north for, I stirred plenty useless dust. Adios!" He swung towards the door, checked. "I'm dropping into the Boxed R before I drift. There's two stiffs and a bay carrying their brand I want to deliver."

Chapter 2

THE flame of a stable lamp beat feebly against darkness that thickened in the Circle L yard. Punchers bunched around the two ponies tied to the corral rail. One waddy held the wavering light shoulder high, staring at the gruesome double burden roped across the saddle of the bay. The mumble of muted talk reached across to Lefty as he stepped out of the house. Heads swiveled and hard eyes surveyed his spare form curiously as he approached. His brother's bulky form emerged from the blur of bodies.

"What's the big idea," he growled, "toting two stiffs on Boxed R ponies?"

"I got a delivery to make," returned Lefty coolly. "The bustards bushwhacked me this side of Thunder Pass. 'Pears the Boxed R sent out a welcoming committee."

"And yuh beat 'em tuh the punch!" A short, roly-poly rider eased in beside him. "Moniker's Pawson," he grinned. "These saddle stiffs call me Porky. I'm foreman around heah."

Lefty met small, shrewd eyes, deeply bedded in the bulging fat of a moonlike face, beneath which triple chins wobbled with every word.

"Glad to know you!" He grasped the pudgy hand. There were tough sinews beneath the flesh. His eyes dropped to the foreman's ample waist. Ivory gun butts protruded from holsters on either side. Pawson looked as soft as a sow's belly and as benignant as a Bible-

puncher. Perplexed, the young rider scanned the bleak, weather-beaten faces that circled him. Lobo always hired a bunch of hard cases and these hombres were sure up to scratch. How come he set a slick hog like Pawson to rod them—and how the heck could a lard barrel handle this tough bunch? The fat foreman packed twin guns. 'Peared he could handle them.

He shrugged and pushed towards the claybank. Why should he give a damn? He wouldn't be around.

With poker faces, the crew eased back as he loosed the ponies and stepped into the claybank's saddle. Leading the bay with its bloody burden, he jogged away, and the darkness swallowed him. One voice reached his ears from the ranks of the alert-eyed punchers: "Ef thet ain't another Lobo—tuh the life!"

Night closed black upon the solitary rider as he followed a winding trail through the jumble of foothills north of the Circle L. The claybank jogged along steadily, while the bay clip-clopped behind. Lefty rolled a smoke and drew upon it thoughtfully as he threaded through the hills. The old man was right, folks sure hated the guts of a Lingren in Eagle Valley. What was it that preacher fellow said down in Yuma? As a guy gives, so shall he receive, and he who lives by the gun shall die by the gun. He sure hit the target. The Circle L was getting just what it had dealt out these twenty-thirty years. Lobo had grabbed every spring, every pasture, every square mile he rodded, through gunsmoke. There wasn't a spread around that didn't carry his scars. No wonder that the Lingren name was plumb poison. Bill Rogers of the Boxed R, blasted when Lobo snatched Willow Spring—Boxed R water—leaving Rogers' red-headed daughter an orphan. Jed Thorburn, winged when the Circle L clawed off a sweet slice of his best range. Hell, the old man had mauled a dozen of them. Even Al's parents burnt like faggots when Lobo made a

furnace of their master's shack. It wasn't surprising the girl didn't smile overmuch. Wouldn't have blamed her if she'd slipped a slug of wolf poison in the old man's chuck years back. Reckon Bill Rogers' girl was still rodding the Boxed R. That girl had spunk. Unconsciously, Lefty fondled his cheek, once laid open by a quirt wielded by that impetuous young woman. She didn't give a hoot for Lobo or any hombre on earth. Maybe she had damned good reason to set a passel of her punchers to bushwhack him. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"—seemed like he couldn't get that Yuma preacher out of his mind.

Impulsively, he reined in the claybank and pulled the bay up to his stirrup. He knotted the bay's lead rope around the horn and fanned it on the rump. It trotted ahead and faded into the shadows. Let the bodies tell their own story to the Boxed R!

Lefty kneed the claybank, angled off around the rounded flank of a ridge and threaded through a stand of scrub oak. He knew every yard of Circle L range like the palm of his hand. Cows lumbered heavily away as he approached a spring, gurgling from a rock-studded slope. He halted, slipped out of leather and stripped off saddle and bridle. He rummaged in a saddlebag, found a strip of rawhide and fashioned a hobble. If the claybank followed the bay home he'd be set afoot. Shouldering saddle and spooled bedroll, he left the hobbled pony to graze and tramped towards the spring.

Drooping willows fringed a muddied pool fed by whispering waters from the spring above. Lefty dumped his load, gathered sticks and built a small fire. Of a sudden, his limbs seemed leaded; his body heavy, as though burdened by the heritage of hate. He dragged his saddle beside the tiny blaze, sank down and relaxed his weary form against it. Paw said they would tear the Circle L apart—well, why in hell shouldn't they? Hadn't Lobo

always prowled the range like a lone wolf, with his fangs bared? Hadn't he rawhided even his own sons, ridden Con and himself with spurs and a spade bit until they beat it for the Border eight years back? He'd sown the seeds—let him reap the harvest!

Back at the Circle L, the crusty old cowman hunched at his desk, staring unseeing at the peeling walls of the fly-specked office. He remained unmoving when light steps pattered down the passage and Alice entered.

"Supper's ready, Paw, and here's your medicine!"

A small bottle in one hand, spoon in the other, she stood by his massive figure.

"Take the damned stuff away!" he grunted.

Unheeding, she carefully poured a spoonful, balanced it carefully. "Open your mouth!" she commanded briskly.

"I tell yuh—"

"Open!" She might have been talking to an unruly child.

Lobo reluctantly tilted his head. His heavy jaw dropped, he swallowed, then grimaced in distaste.

"Now let's eat!" she smiled.

The cowman heaved his massive form out of the swivel chair and lumbered, like a great bear, down the passage behind her slight figure.

Roast beef, baked beans, a steaming pie and doughnuts were set on the spotless oilcloth that covered the kitchen table. Lobo yanked out a chair, while Alice removed a bubbling coffeepot from the stove.

"Won't Lefty be around for supper?" she inquired casually.

"Ferget thet good-for-nothin' tumbleweed," grunted the cowman. "He'll end up decorating a tree."

"Has he pulled out—already?" There was quick disappointment in her even tones.

"Yep!"

"Why, I thought—"

"He'd stick by his paw! Like hell! I shore foaled three useless coyotes. Ain't one worth a damn."

The girl's lips moved in quick protest, but she glanced at the cowman's rugged features and quickly compressed them. With a bang, she set the coffeepot on the table and sat down.

"You can't break a man like a horse—if he has spirit," she said pointedly.

"Who's breakin' Lefty?" he roared, bull neck swelling with quick anger. "I offered the ungrateful young mulehead the whole danged spread—ef he'd marry you."

Alice's head came round quickly. "He refused?"

"Turned me down flat."

"Oh!" The girl's voice was subdued. She bent her head over her plate so that Lobo, shoveling chuck onto his plate, should not glimpse the pain in her brown eyes.

Out in the bunkhouse, men mulled around the smoke-filled room, hashing over the return of Lobo's long-lost son and the two bodies he had toted to the Boxed R. A group gathered around the table, fingering greasy cards. At the far end, the cowman's unwieldy eldest son and Porky Pawson hunkered against the wall and exchanged low-voiced talk.

"He herded me outa the office," grumbled George throatily, "while he made talk with Lefty. They's some shenanigans afoot. The old moseyhorn's sick, else why's the gal physicking him?"

Porky beamed, his chins quivering like jelly. "Ain't it plain," he pointed out smoothly. "Lefty drifts in, Lobo cashes, Lefty lifts the spread." He pulled a creased wad of newspaper from his pants pocket and smoothed it out on a denimed knee. "Tore this outa newspaper some feller left in the Silver Spur. Lissen! 'Lefty and Conrad Lingren, you're wanted at home.' That's Lobo's doing.

Guess he left you outa the deal, George!" Porky's moon face creased with vast merriment. "I got something else!" The foreman straightened his barrel body with surprising agility and stepped across to a bunk. A folded sheet in one hand and a full whisky bottle in the other, he padded back to the glowering George.

The big man's arm shot out; a huge hand fastened on the bottle. He yanked the cork with strong teeth, spat it out and tilted the bottle. "Wal?" he queried, after a long drink.

Porky chuckled and settled down again beside him. "Look at this!"

George Lingren eyed a yellowed reward dodger. His smoldering eyes ran over the wording:

$500 REWARD—DEAD OR ALIVE

WANTED FOR HOLDUP OF DALTON CITY BANK, CONRAD LINGREN. HEIGHT, 5 FT. 10 IN. WEIGHT, 175 LBS. HAIR, BLOND. EYES, BLUE. HEAVY JAW. DANGEROUS GUNMAN. SEND INFORMATION TO FRED GERARD, SHERIFF, DALTON COUNTY, TEXAS.

"So Con's on the dodge!" commented Lingren slowly. "The crazy galoot alwus tangled with trouble." He nodded towards the crude reproduction of the wanted man's features. "Spittin' image of Lefty—they was twins."

"Shore," smiled Porky. "Con's clean outa the picture now. Gamble he was planted long ago. Ef Lefty warn't around now"—He paused; his shrewd eyes slid sideways towards the big man's brooding features. "Wal, I gotta drift over tuh the house f'r orders."

He moved away, elbowing through lounging waddies, towards the door. George Lingren took another pull at the half-empty bottle. His blue eyes hardened with labored speculation. If Lefty weren't around and Lobo checked out, the Circle L would be his. He was the eldest son, it was his by rights anyway.

Below the murmuring waters of Willow Spring, Lefty watched the fire sink to a dull red glow. Coyotes snarled over a carcass beyond the ridge. Swift-circling brown bats chittered around the trees. A steer bellowed mournfully down the draw.

The rider straightened in the shadows, unroped his bedroll and spread his soogans. Touching a match to a final cigarette, he yanked off his boots, set his saddle at the head of the roll and flopped the tarp covering open.

The moon floated high, silvering the silent ridges and tracing an intricate shadow-pattern of the branches above the bulky bedroll. In the cold light the grey canvas tarp, stained by long usage, looked like a shroud.

Among the rank grass beyond the pool the claybank was feeding, crow-hopping from patch to patch on hobbled forefeet. Like grey ghosts, cows drifted up to water and faded away again.

Of a sudden, the claybank's head came up, ears pricked. Ambling steers froze in their tracks, widespread horns swinging as their muzzles pointed towards the outcropping boulders of the slope above.

The quiet was rent asunder by the roar of a gun. Again and again it lanced fire, before the echoes of the first shot had rumbled away among the hills. Lead whined across the pool, thudded into the bedroll beneath the willows. Crouched behind a boulder, the assassin peered intently towards the dim bulge of canvas. Again the Winchester was carefully leveled and another bullet tore into the still bedroll.

Silence again descended upon Willow Spring, broken only by the clacking of horns as cows panicked madly into the night.

Chapter 3

DRY twigs crackled beneath the willows as a tall form rose from the shadows and eased between the tree trunks toward the bullet-ripped bedroll. Lefty pulled back the tarp, threw out the dozen rounded rocks that bulged it and surveyed the torn soogans with interest. For a second time that night he sat down and pulled off his boots. Yawning, he slid beneath the tarp, cradled his head on the curve of the saddle and gratefully drifted into velvety depths. Hazily, as his weary muscles relaxed, he wondered who had figured in the second attempt to plug him in the span of a day. Was it a wandering Boxed R waddy avenging Circle L gunplay? Or were Lobo's enemies dogging him, determined to wipe out the Lingren clan? Well, they weren't likely to plunk more bullets that night into what they figured was a bullet-riddled body. Tomorrow? Tomorrow was another day. With luck, the next time he unspooled his roll he'd be a long way from Eagle Valley. With this comforting thought he dropped off to sleep.

Dawn painted the peaks with pale gold and a chilly breeze rustled the willows when Lefty stirred and sat up, knuckling the sleep out of his eyes. Steers stood hock-deep in the pool. A jackrabbit popped up a dozen paces distant, one ear erect, the other hanging limply, gazing at the tousle-headed human in startled surprise.

"Boo!" yelled Lefty, and grinned as it shook its stubby tail, made a few preliminary zigzag jumps, then shot away like a bullet and was gone. The claybank stood motionless below the spring, dozing. Then the lean rider noticed the jagged holes in the tarp and recollection of the events of the night flowed into his brain. He wriggled out of the roll, yanked on his boots and headed for the slope beyond the pool.

The sun-dried earth was seamed with rock, eroding shale projecting as thick as a porcupine's quills.

High on the slope, Lefty circled, eyes scrutinizing the pitted ground. Abruptly, he stopped, scanning the faint imprint of a sharp-toed riding boot. Bent low, he followed the tracks, blurred and indistinct on the rocky ground. Finally, with a shrug, he quit toiling uphill and dropped down again towards the pool.

Somewhere, beyond the ridge top, chances were, he'd find the tracks of the bushwhacker's pony, but why sweat farther up the steep incline? By sundown, Eagle Valley and its bitter hatreds would be miles behind.

Back at the pool, he stripped to the waist, washed off the clinging trail dust, dried himself with his shirt and slipped it on. Then he rolled up and roped his soogans. Ten minutes later he was astride the claybank, heading towards the rising sun.

Dust drifting ahead tensed the rider into alertness. Squinting against the slanting sunrays, he saw two horsemen emerge from a draw, riding northward. One glanced around, sighted him. Instantly, they both wheeled and pounded down-trail.

Trailing long dust plumes, the strangers drew close. Of a sudden the close-watching Lefty chuckled. There was no mistaking the foremost rider, quirt dangling from her right wrist. Tempestuous Kate Rogers had been in a hurry ever since she first galloped a sweated

pony into the Willow School yard, fourteen-fifteen years before, and she hadn't lost the habit yet.

Lefty checked the claybank as the girl drew close. She yanked the white-stockinged sorrel she forked to an impetuous halt. Bit foamed-flecked, the animal rose high upon its hind legs, pawing. Balancing in the saddle with superb grace, the girl forced it down, watching Lefty with stormy eyes.

Still as pretty as a heart flush and explosive as a powder keg, he decided. Her thick hair, gleaming like molten copper in the sun, was stuffed into a stiff-brimmed Stetson. She wore a dark flannel shirt and denims that failed to hide altogether the curves of her lithe form. Brown leather riding boots were decorated with scrolls of brass studs. The girl's full lips were as scarlet as the bandanna knotted around her neck and her features were tanned as deeply as any puncher's. Kate Rogers' was the vivid beauty of a red rose, accentuated by the smoldering fires in her dark eyes and the imperious poise of her head. Those eyes were flashing now as they swept over the claybank, noted the brand and rested angrily upon its rider's bland features.

Behind her, a lanky, thin-faced rider checked his pony. His long, bony face was devoid of expression. Colorless and rock-hard, his eyes, sunk above high cheekbones, focused upon Lefty in a cold, unwinking stare. Lanky Lefevre, the tall rider well knew, had been foreman of the Boxed R since Rogers' death. A dangerous man, he had tangled with Lobo aplenty.

"So the Lingrens are horse thieves as well as rustlers!" challenged the girl, scornfully. "We're used to close-herding our cows. Now that you're back it seems we shall have to hobble our ponies, too."

"Gamble you wish it were Con!" mocked Lefty. Kate had been mighty sweet on his devil-may-care twin brother.

"At least he was always a gentleman!" she flung back. "And I'll have you know we hang horse thieves."

"I borrowed this fuzzytail from a bushwhacker—he didn't need him any more," drawled Lefty, his eyes on Lanky's gun hand.

"What do you mean?" There was genuine surprise in the girl's voice. She might be self-willed and impulsive, but Lefty knew Kate Rogers was incapable of duplicity.

"The gent shot my horse; I grabbed his."

The girl swung round to her foreman. "So that's where the two bodies came from!" Her eyes, clouded with doubt, came back to Lefty. "Why did you pack those two dead men in on a Boxed R pony, and why dump them on the Boxed R?" Her lips curled. "You Lingrens were always boastful of your killings."

The rider smiled with his lips, feeling for the makin's with his right hand.

"The rattlesnakes forked Boxed R horses."

"Are you trying to tell me that those men came from my spread?" Her voice vibrated with rising anger.

"They straddled Boxed R horses."

"Why, Lefty Lingren!" Kate Rogers jammed rowels into the sorrel's barrel. The pony leapt forward. The thong of the quirt whistled as the girl's arm swung back.

Lefty dropped his half-made cigarette, ducked low and kneed the claybank. The quirt sang down. Then the big claybank, surging forward, hit the lighter pony, breast on, bringing it to a quivering stop. Lefty's hooked fingers fastened on the raging girl's left arm. Relentlessly, he pulled her towards him, yanking her half out of the saddle. Helpless and unbalanced, suspended between the two ponies, the girl twisted impotently. With his free hand, Lefty twisted the quirt out of her clenched fist, slipped the loop off her wrist and dropped it into the dust. Lips compressed, he stared down into her blazing eyes. "Some day, Kate," he promised tightly, "I'm

gonna shake the daylights outa you, you doggoned little hell-cat."

Meanwhile, the Boxed R foreman, hand itching on his gun butt, was side-stepping his pony to get a clear bead on the Circle L rider—half-covered by the girl's body.

Lefty suddenly thrust her away from him and reined clear, left hand poised above his holster. "Loose your horses, Lanky!" he jeered.

Features expressionless, the foreman froze. Lobo Lingren had long toted the fastest gun in the upper valley, and the two bodies packed into the Boxed R by the bay at daybreak were proof aplenty that his son was no slouch with an iron. There was a stark ruthlessness in the icy blue eyes that challenged his, a stubborn set to the tall, spare form, that belonged to Lobo himself. And such was the reputation that the old Circle L ramrod had built through bloody years, that the bleak-eyed foreman held his hand, tortured by uneasy doubt.

Kate Rogers had regained her seat. She wheeled between the two men. Her voice, thick with suppressed emotion, broke a tension-packed silence. "Hold it, Lanky. There's been killing aplenty." The foreman's hand dropped.

"What's the claybank worth? He isn't bad—for the Boxed R," came Lefty's voice.

"Keep him—and be damned!" she threw at the taunting rider.

"Say, Kate, you're liable to hurt my feelings."

"Feelings!" she exploded. "You Lingrens have ice water in your veins."

"I'll stake my saddle you haven't!"

Disdaining a reply, she kneed her sorrel towards the foreman. Lanky still sat motionless, watching Lefty with fixed, unblinking gaze.

"Some day we'll find out what's in his veins," he promised.

"From behind a rock?" queried the lanky rider.

"Let's ride!" cut in the girl hastily, setting spurs to her mount. The foreman wheeled, tailed her. Together they thudded away, screened by a rising dust cloud.

Lefty spilled tobacco dust into another paper. "If those bushwhacking bustards hailed from the Boxed R, I gamble Kate isn't wise," he told the claybank. "Anyways, I got a good horse outa the deal—lost a sweet little pony, too." He ran his tongue along the paper, reached up and pulled a match from his hat band. "Wal, le's go! We gotta sample Jake's liquor at the Silver Spur, afore we beat it for the Border."

Indian Wells sweltered in the heat of midday when Lefty jogged down the widening of the stage road that was Main Street. The town hadn't changed much more than the Circle L, decided the rider, blue eyes flicking around. Two rows of weather-beaten stores and saloons straggled along the business street. Here and there a pony hunched at the hitch rail, dispiritedly switching its tail. The Courthouse stood square and somber. There was no movement around the doors of the brick-faced bank, and two wagons were hauled up outside the Valley Merchandise Store. And there was the hotel, paint-blistered, with its bullet-chipped sign. The same old rockers were set beneath its wooden awning, and danged if there wasn't a fat drummer, mouth agape, snoring in one of the seats, just like there was eight years back. Maybe the jasper hadn't woke up yet! Lefty loosed a shrill "Yippee!" quickly straightened his face and gazed blankly ahead. The drummer jumped as though he had been stung by a centipede and stared wildly around. Then he sighted the solemn rider drifting past on the claybank. Lefty saw his lips move, and shook with mirth.

Buzzing flies were the only occupants of the Silver

Spur, with the exception of Jake, burly proprietor and barkeep, polishing glasses, boredom heavy upon his features.

Lefty crunched across the sanded floor and ambled up to the bar. "Jest heard," he commented genially, "that with every five drinks you give a snake free. Lemme have a slug!"

Jake sighed and solemnly pushed a bottle of bourbon and a newly polished glass across the bar. He was hardened to cowboy witticisms.

The rider poured three fingers. "Kinda quiet around town!" he observed.

"Which ain't saying a storm's not likely to blow up," rumbled Jake.

"How come?"

Jake raised his heavy shoulders and continued listlessly to restore the luster to his bottled goods. "A feller hears things."

"Such as?"

The saloon man sauntered down the bar, eyed the brand on the claybank tied outside and ambled back. "You should know," he grumbled, "forkin' a Boxed R pony. A green hand, mebbe? I ain't seen yuh around." He leaned forward and whispered hoarsely, "They's talk around that Lobo Lingren ain't long for this world. Whin he goes, Holy Mither, won't they play hell with the Circle L!"

"He's got a son to hold it," pointed out the rider, sipping his drink.

"A son, and what a son!" Jake laughed derisively. "He's not another Lobo—the Lord be thanked!"

Decisive steps resounded on the plankwalk. The batwings were thrust open and a tall, long-featured man stepped in. A sheriff's star glinted upon his sagging vest. Grey eyes keen against sunburnt features, he glanced

around. The tight set of his lips was emphasized by the twin guns sagging from his lean waist.

He headed for the lounging Lefty. "You the prodigal son?"

"I reckon so, in a manner of speakin', but they clean fergot the fatted calf," grinned the rider.

"Pull outa the Circle L after sundown last night?"

"Shore."

"Tangle horns with Lobo?"

"Maybe," returned Lefty carelessly.

"And he threatened tuh ride tuh town and change his will?"

The lean rider's blue eyes hardened; his stubborn jaw clamped tight. "Say, what's it to you?"

"I'm firing the questions," replied Sheriff Jim Waters curtly.

"Go ahead and fire 'em," snapped Lefty, "but I'm not supplying any more answers."

"You won't say whar you bedded down last night?"

"Nope."

"And whar you was at sunup?"

Lefty shook his head.

"Wal, I guess we better mosey down tuh the office."

"I got other ideas."

The sheriff smiled slowly. "You're going, Lefty—right now," he said softly.

"Why?"

"Yore paw's body was found two miles from the Circle L at sunup. Some coyote blasted half his conk off—and his gun warn't drawn."

Chapter 4

SHERIFF Waters' eyes dwelt closely upon Lobo Lingren's youngest son as he made the announcement of the cowman's killing. He saw the hostility fade from the rider's blue eyes, replaced by stark surprise. Lefty gulped. "Bushwhacked, you say?"

"What else?" returned the sheriff gruffly. "Le's drift!"

Lefty fumbled mechanically in his pants pocket, dropped a dollar on the bar and moved away on the heels of the lawman. All the belligerence had oozed out of his lank form. His second drink stood untasted. Jake watched the two—the sheriff sided by the tall rider—until they slid from view beyond the edge of the window.

"What a knobhead you turned out t' be," he told himself in deep disgust. "The boy has Lobo's head and eyes and yez blab of his dead father." He scratched his broad nose thoughtfully, "Now, who in the name of the twelve apostles did slip a slug into the ould man?"

Waters led the way to the little tin-roofed sheriff's office behind the Courthouse, nodded towards one of the straight-backed chairs lined against the wall, jackknifed into his squeaky swivel chair and swung around to eye the still-faced Lefty.

"Now," he commenced briskly, "mebbe you'll give me a line on yore whereabouts after yuh pulled out of the Circle L. Or d'ye crave tuh chew it over in the hoosegow f'r a while?"

The rider's wide lips twisted in the pale ghost of a

grin. He was still striving to adjust his faculties to the shock of his father's death. If the old man had dropped dead, it would have been believable; but to be cut down so swiftly, almost within sight of his own ranch house —it just didn't seem possible. "Sorry I kicked over the traces, Sheriff!" His tone was apologetic.

Waters smiled thinly and fished a tobacco sack from a vest pocket. "Let it pass; you got the old man's spirit."

"I bedded down at Willow Spring. Pulled out right after sunup and hit for town; ran across Kate Rogers and Lanky Lefevre on the trail."

The sheriff studied a dusty calendar above Lefty's head. "What's this about you packin' in two stiffs?"

"Four hombres laid for me this side of Thunder Pass. I brought two in; they straddled Boxed R horses. Figgered I'd deliver them."

"Changed yore mind?"

"Yep, I sent them back—on a bay."

"Lanky make trouble?"

"Nope, but the gal—wal, you know Kate!"

"So yuh figger the Boxed R laid f'r yuh?" commented the sheriff.

"Can you blame 'em?" inquired Lefty, with a faint smile.

"Wal, Lobo warn't exactly loved around the Valley," conceded Waters, "but we draw the line at murder." He drew slowly upon his smoke. "Any idea who blasted him?"

The lean rider's forehead creased. "Gawd knows! But I'll git the son."

"Lay off the gunplay!" snapped Waters. "He'll get a jury trial, and ef he's guilty—he'll hang."

"Shore!" said Lefty slowly.

"Guess you kin ramble," decided the sheriff, "but stick around the Valley. I gotta brace thet Boxed R bunch."

Lefty straightened, stood pondering. "Say, what was that you said about changing a will? The old man couldn't have cut me out; reckon I was never in. I beat it way back."

"Drop over and brace Jedge McFarlane," suggested the sheriff carelessly. "He handled Lobo's legal affairs. You'll find his office above the bank. And 'member, I said stick around!"

"Mister," returned the rider earnestly, "I'm stickin' closer than a saddle burr—'til you stretch Paw's killer." He added mentally, "Or I plug the bustard."

Still cogitating, Lefty stepped out into the sun glare and drifted down the street. Looked like someone was hell-bent upon cleaning out the Lingrens. Wonder if the jasper who riddled his bedroll wiped out the Old Man? And just what did Lanky Lefevre know about it all? The barkeep sure hit the bull's-eye when he said that they'd tear the Circle L to shreds when Lobo cashed in. Took the Old Man a lifetime to build up that spread. How long could George hold it together? Big as a bull and with the brains of a bull, that was George. When the Boxed R, and Lazy J and Triple S began to get in their licks, he would have about as much show as a steer in a slaughterhouse.

Lefty reached the brick-fronted bank and clumped up a wooden stairway that slanted from the alley beside it. He pushed open a screen door and found himself in a passage. The second door on the left bore the inscription "Judge McFarlane."

He turned the doorknob and entered.

Rows of massive, leather-bound volumes were shelved around the walls. A huge steel safe bulked to his left. Beyond it, at a roll-top desk, sat a silvery-haired, aging man with wrinkled features. He wore a white shirt with black string tie. Neatly folded, his black coat lay upon a chair, a dark felt hat set upon it. At Lefty's entrance he

glanced up from a heavy tome, marked his place with a long, lean finger and favored the visitor with a friendly smile. Judge McFarlane was a power, a benevolent power, in Eagle Valley. He was a stickler for justice and presided over the district court. Behind his tired eyes reposed an infinite knowledge of Valley affairs.

"Name's Lingren, Lefty Lingren, Judge!"

"Sit down, young man!" The judge inserted a blotter in the book and closed it with a bang. He leaned back and scrutinized his visitor. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"Sheriff says my father made a will. May I see it?"

The judge's eyes twinkled. "Wills are confidential affairs, Lefty, the contents of which are not to be divulged until the testator—er—shuffles off this mortal coil."

"Wal, Paw's dead."

"What!" The judge straightened. "Heart trouble?"

"Lead poisonin'—he was bushwhacked this sunup," returned Lefty laconically.

"Has Sheriff Waters apprehended the murderer?"

"Nope, but if he doesn't get him, I will." There was flat finality in the tall rider's voice.

"So!" murmured the judge. "He must have had a premonition. Last week, young man, your father changed his will. Previously, the estate was to be equally divided among his issue. Now—I speak quite unofficially, you understand—everything is left to one Alice Bradford, his adopted daughter. Each of his sons receive—one dollar."

With unmoved features the rider listened. "Can Al draw dinero, to run the spread?" he queried.

"There are ample funds on deposit in the Valley Bank. As executor, I shall be happy to authorize reasonable withdrawals."

"Thanks, Judge!" Lefty scraped back his chair.

"Not disappointed, I hope!" The judge eyed the spare form with interest.

"Nope!" Lefty's voice was emphatic. "Al's got it comin'. Me and Conrad pulled out, and George isn't worth a shuck."

"Your father was a man of forceful character and fixed ideas. I endeavored to dissuade him." Judge McFarlane shrugged. "As well try to move a mountain." He rose, a tall, slightly stooped figure, and extended his hand. "Well, good luck, Lefty! The girl will need—all —your help."

"Don't I know it!" grunted the rider, as his sinewy fingers gripped the judge's.

Sunset flared crimson behind the Apaches when Lefty rode back to the ranch to which he had sworn never to return. Light flooded through the open doorway of the cook shack. As he watered his pony, the mumble of voices flowed across the dimness of the yard.

He headed for the cook shack, changed his mind and slanted off towards the kitchen door of the ranch house. Unceremoniously he threw it open and stepped inside. Alice sat at the table, eating alone. At Lefty's entrance, her head came up in quick surprise. "You—back?"

He grinned crookedly. "Why not?"

The girl's bewildered eyes fixed upon his rugged features, as though she strove to find the answer to a riddle. Then, significantly, they dropped to his gun. "You know—about Paw?"

"Bushwhacked! Shore, the sheriff put me wise."

Uncertainly, she pushed back her chair. "Sit down, Lefty," she said quietly; "I'll lay out another plate."

"Guess I'll eat with the crew." He swung casually towards the door.

She fluttered around the table like a frightened bird. Her fingers plucked at his shirted arm. "Don't go to the

cookhouse—tonight. Eat with me!" Her voice was low, urgent.

Lefty glanced around, read the appeal in her troubled eyes.

"Mighty nice of yuh, Al," he grunted, a little self-consciously, "but I want to eat with the boys."

"Lefty!" her fingers tightened.

Impatiently he shrugged free.

"Don't go over there!" she panted.

"Hell, why not?" He was at the door now.

"They—they all think you killed Paw."

If he heard her, he gave no sign. Standing rigid, arm still outstretched, she watched his lean form, dim in the dying light, move stubbornly across the yard towards the rectangle of glowing light that was the doorway of the cook shack. Then she turned slowly and eyed her half-eaten meal. Numbly, she piled the dishes and stacked them in the sink.

The jingle of his spurs drowned by the clatter within, Lefty reached the cook shack and—for the moment unobserved—stood framed in the doorway. His cool blue eyes swept down the two rows of waddies facing each other across the long plank table, busily plying knives and forks. He noted his brother George's big form, bulking in a straight-backed chair at the far end of the table. Saw Porky Pawson, the foreman, overflowing a seat at the other end. Then a puncher's startled shout brought every head around. "Gee whillikins! Look who's heah!"

The clatter of cutlery and buzz of conversation was cut off as though by a sharp-edged axe. Lefty stared into a double row of bleak, accusing eyes.

Chair legs scraped harshly across an ominous silence. At the far end of the table, George Lingren heaved ponderously to his feet, rolled towards the door as heavily

and implacably as a great bear. The crew watched in tensed anticipation.

"You gotta hell of a gall, ridin' inter the Circle L," rumbled the big man, blue eyes dark with anger.

"Reckon I got as much right as you to stick around." Lefty's voice was cold, his eyes alert.

"After salivatin' Paw?"

"Who claims I killed him?"

George Lingren stopped, knuckles whitening as his heavy fists clenched and unclenched. "Yuh locked horns with Paw and rode out. Give us a windy about packin' two bodies tuh the Boxed R. Yuh loosed the pack pony and laid f'r Paw at sunup."

"I was at Willow Spring at sunup."

"Quit lyin'!" George's voice was thick with rage. He swayed forward, reaching a huge paw towards Lefty. "Beat it!"

"Swing the coyote!" growled a puncher. An approving rumble ran down the table.

The big fellow's hooked fingers clawed at Lefty's shoulder. The wiry rider dropped into a swift crouch, shot forward like a projectile. His head butted deep into his brother's belly where it bulged over his belt. With an agonized groan, George Lingren folded up and plunked heavily to the floor, gasping for breath.

In a flash, the expectant silence was shattered by a tornado of yells and confused shouting. A bench crashed, tin plates clattered to the floor, the tables rocked, as enraged waddies scrambled for the aggressor.

Lefty backed to the doorway. His left hand fastened around the butt of the swiveled gun. The holster jerked up. "Hold it!" he rasped.

Foremost in the pack, a lean puncher hurtled towards him. Fire lanced from the uptilted holster. The puncher jerked erect, spun around by the impact of the .44 slug. A look of numbed amazement upon his weathered fea-

tures, he twirled and crashed—blood seeping scarlet through the shoulder of his grey shirt.

"I got four more," grated Lefty.

Before the threat of the smoking gun, the packed waddies pulled back, baffled and irresolute, like a pack of hounds straining to pull down a buck but fearful of the sharp-spiked horns.

Lefty moved forward, left hand frozen upon his gun butt, blue eyes hard as twin sapphires. "Back tuh yore seats, gents—I crave to talk."

Reluctantly, the growling pack of punchers gave ground, cowed by the implacable, square-jawed figure with the ready gun. One by one, they slid back into their seats until the floor was clear, except for the burly George, set on his hunkers, still winded, and the squirming form of the lean puncher with a smashed shoulder.

Lefty moved sideways towards his brother's vacated chair, holding the smoldering crew by threat of his gun, watching their every movement like a lion tamer in a cage. At the farther end of the table, the pudgy Porky was the only man who had never moved. Throughout, he had remained in his seat, smiling benevolently and finishing his meal, as though such a fracas was a nightly and incidental diversion.

Lefty reached the end of the table, seated himself and laid his gun beside his plate. Then he addressed himself to the double row of turned heads and fiery eyes. "You jaspers have tangled your ropes," he announced curtly. "Jest to set you right, let me say I left Willow Spring at sunup and crossed the trail of Kate Rogers and Lanky Lefevre not thirty minutes later. That clears me of Paw's killin'. And as for the spread—Al gets that, accordin' to Lobo's will. George and I draw a dollar apiece—maybe that's all we're worth. If any of you hairpins doubts my word, now's the time to yell—and we'll settle it with six-

guns." He paused. Utter silence held the cook shack, broken only by the groaning of the winged puncher.

"George, pack that feller into town and get his shoulder fixed," barked Lefty.

The big man heaved laboriously to his feet, stood uncertainly. His heavy jaw moved in incipient expostulation.

"Git!" snapped his brother.

Heavy features creased in protest, George Lingren bent, hauled the wounded man to his feet and levered him out into the night. The foreman's high-pitched voice cut through the tension of uncertainty. "Guess Lobo's killer got the boys buffaloed, Lefty. Me, I never had yuh figgered f'r the bushwhacker. Reckon you done persuaded these lunkheaded saddle stiffs now." He chuckled until his triple chins wobbled, and poured himself another mug of coffee.

Lefty listened with unmoved features. Again he addressed the silent crew. "I'm takin' over the Circle for Al—and we're headin' plumb into trouble. Isn't a spread around but hates our guts, and afore Lobo's under the ground they'll be tearin' this outfit apart. So oil up those six-guns! There's double wages 'til the trouble straightens out. If any of you gents don't stomach gunsmoke, draw your time at the office after supper." He slipped his gun back into the holster and reached for a platter of beans.

Low-voiced talk buzzed up and down the table. Lefty dug into his chuck, while the crew built cigarettes and sifted out. When he got through, the cook shack was empty, except for Limpy, the cook, clearing the table. Crippled, tight-lipped and sour-voiced, Limpy had wrestled dishes on the Circle L as long as Lefty could remember. He was a solitary man, given to few words. Some said a bullet ended his riding days, others laid it to an outlaw pony. Limpy never said which.

Lefty leaned back, loosened his belt and felt for the makin's. "You dish up good chuck, Limpy," he grinned. "Sorta keeps a feller primed for trouble."

"Wal, heah's trouble a-comin'!" retorted the cook acidly, with a side glance towards the yard.

Lefty followed his eyes and stiffened as the tall form of Sheriff Waters loomed in the doorway. The sheriff's grey eyes were hard. He headed straight for the lanky rider. "Throw yore saddle on thet claybank," he said curtly. "We're hittin' f'r town."

"Say, what's on your mind?" demanded the puzzled Lefty.

"I jest rode over from the Boxed R. Kate Rogers and Lanky swear they never had sight nor sound of you near Willow Spring."

Chapter 5

THE genial smile faded from Lefty's rugged features as the import of the sheriff's stark announcement sank home. The chance meeting with Kate Rogers and the Boxed R foreman had furnished his only alibi. Now that they had 'crossed him, what proof could he furnish that he had not fired the assassin's bullet?

"Le's drift!" The sheriff's dry voice cut in upon his thoughts. As if dazed, he blundered to his feet. His brain was numbed by the implications of his arrest. What chance had the Circle L against its ring of enemies if he was lodged behind the bars? Without a leader, the crew—if enough punchers stuck to form a crew—would be helpless. The spread would crumble like a house of

cards. And the real killer would get a good laugh out of it all! But what use to argue with the flint-eyed Waters when the finger of guilt pointed straight at him? Damn those double-crossing Boxed R coyotes!

"Sheriff!" he pleaded, "will you lissen to me afore we ride in?"

"Shoot!" grunted Waters, "and make it snappy!"

"You know how the Circle L stands! Lobo's been clawin' the Boxed R and every other spread around, for years. He wiped out Bill Rogers and Bill's gal ain't forgot. Boxed R waddies laid for me recently. There's a dozen Circle L boys'll swear to the Boxed R brands on the two horses I brought in. Some coyote plunked plenty lead into my bedroll last night at Willow Spring, figgerin' I was inside it. Maybe it was Lanky Lefevre, maybe not. Point is, someone is dead set on wiping out the Lingrens—and I gamble it's the Boxed R bunch. Thet's why Kate and Lanky gave you a bum steer."

The sheriff yawned. "Yuh talk fast, Lefty, but not fast enough. Kin yuh prove yuh bedded down at Willow Spring? Ef not, button up and le's ride."

Lefty racked his brains in desperation. "Yep!" he shot back.

"Wal, spread yore hand—pronto."

"The proof's at Willow Spring. Lay over 'til sunup and we'll hit for the Spring."

"Ef yuh don't split the breeze meanwhiles," commented the sheriff caustically. "Nope, Lefty, come agen!"

"You sure got me pegged for a killer," complained the rider bitterly. "My word isn't worth a damn. Let's hit for the Spring right now—the moon's full."

"Ef yore runnin' a sandy," promised the sheriff grimly, "I'll put yuh behind bars 'til yuh rot—or hang."

"I can prove you're hittin' a blind trail," persisted Lefty stubbornly.

"Mebbe. Meanwhile"—the sheriff reached out and jerked the lean rider's gun from its holster, thrust it beneath his own waistband—"I'll take care of this, in case yuh git notions. Now throw yore kak on a hawse, and hustle, afore I change my mind."

Stirrup to stirrup, the two rode into the dark-shadowed hills. Quiet cloaked the solitudes. Floating high, the moon silvered the ridges and converted the canyons into black chasms. Westward, the Apaches bulked in eternal serenity. Deep and mournful, the distant lowing of cows drifted through the still air. It just didn't seem possible, mused Lefty, as he jogged along beside the silent sheriff, that murder lurked in those silent hills and that at any moment the peaceful range might blaze into bloody battle. Lobo had sure left a legacy behind him.

Steers scattered as the two pulled up to the pool below the Spring. Lefty stepped down, loosened his bedroll and spooled behind the cattle. "Take a gander at my roll, first," he suggested. He spread the soogans in the white moonlight, bent and indicated the jagged rents in the tarp and the bullet-torn blankets.

The sheriff nodded. "Whar d'ye bed down?" he inquired.

Lefty pushed through the low-hanging branches of the willows, cast around at a crouch, stopped by a tree trunk. "There's my butts!" He indicated two cigarette stubs crushed into the earth.

Waters struck a match and examined the trunk of the willow. Its smooth bark was gouged the width of a bullet, a foot above the ground level.

"Whar d'ye claim this jasper was shootin' from?" he asked, noncommittally.

Lefty pointed across the pool glimmering in the moonlight. "From the cutbank."

Without further words, the sheriff strode around the

pool and commenced to scramble up the steep slope. Lefty dogged him.

"There's tracks higher up," volunteered the rider. "Ridin' boots."

"Mighta been there a week," grunted Waters.

Chests heaving, they reached the crest of the ridge. On the farther side, the terrain sloped gently down to a shallow draw. In the draw, a solitary scrub oak stood like a stubby sentinel, casting a black blotch of shadow.

Seized by sudden inspiration, Lefty pointed down towards the oak. "I gamble the sidewinder tied his horse right there."

"Le's go see!" Waters was more affable now. Lefty was fired by new hope; at least the sheriff was willing to be reasonable.

In truth, Waters had never been wholly convinced of Lefty Lingren's guilt, despite the evidence. Ruthless, when guilt was proven, experience had clothed the veteran sheriff with caution. Time had told him it paid to reserve judgment until the last card was played. While he had no liking for the Lingren clan—Lobo had given him trouble aplenty—yet he had no wish to saddle the cattleman's killing upon his tumbleweed son. Long years behind a law badge had made him as keen a judge of character as an Indian was of horseflesh. Lefty just did not carry a bushwhacker's brand. But someone had foully murdered Lobo Lingren and the wiry Lefty was mighty free with an iron—witness the two bodies he had packed in. As for Kate Rogers and Lanky Lefevre's evidence—there were decades of hatred to color it.

These thoughts flitted through the sheriff's mind as he dropped down the slope behind Lefty.

The rider grunted with disgust as they entered the pool of shadow beneath the tree. It was hopeless hunting tracks in the thick gloom.

Waters circled the tree in the moonlight. The flinty

ground told little, and what soft earth lay between the rocks was cut up by the sharp hoofs of cows.

Meanwhile, the indefatigable Lefty was gathering dry sticks. He dumped an armful beneath the oak, set a match to the tinder-dry wood. It flared up, bathing the gnarled trunk and twisted limbs above with flickering white light. But Lefty's eyes were searching the ground. Metal flashed. With a yell, he plunged forward, dropped upon his knees and scraped together four empty cartridge cases.

The sheriff stepped up behind him, eyes questing.

"Look at these!" panted the rider, his voice high with triumph. "The bustard tied here, dropped his empties—and eased me out of a tight!" Lefty was grinning now, for the first time since leaving the Circle L. At last Lady Luck was smiling, just when it seemed everything was lost.

He tipped the tinkling cartridge cases into the sheriff's palm. Waters gave them a quick glance and stowed them in a pants pocket. Without a word, he yanked the rider's six-gun from beneath his waistband and handed it to the beaming Lefty. "Beat it!" he said gruffly. " 'Pears you tole a straight story. I'm sticking around f'r daylight. Come sunup I'll cast around f'r sign. Let thet bedroll lay!"

"Mister, the way I feel," returned Lefty earnestly, "I'd leave everything lay and hoof it back to the spread —reckon I could most spread my wings and fly back."

The rising sun crept down the peeled-pole front of the bunkhouse. Dust rose thick in the corral as loops flicked over the milling saddle stock and punchers led their ponies out of the haze. In twos and threes they threw on saddles, adjusted headstalls, mounted and rode away.

A lone figure, standing by the house, Lefty raised his

arm silently in return to their salutations as they passed. When the last rider loped off in a flurry of dust, he glumly opened the kitchen door and eased inside.

"Paid off twelve," he announced abruptly, "which leaves eleven."

Sleeves tucked up, Alice was busy at the sink.

"The Boxed R musters a dozen riders, the Triple S eight and the Lazy J thirty," she threw over her shoulder, "which adds up to fifty. And if they hire those twelve quitters, which they will—sixty-two. Don't you think you had better talk terms?"

"It isn't up to me," he growled morosely. "You're boss around here. Guess you didn't know Lobo left you the spread."

She dried her hands on a towel, watching him with quiet eyes. "Yes, he told me—the night before he died."

"And how long did Lobo figger you'd hold it?" he asked roughly.

Alice's slim form straightened; she met the challenging stare in Lefty's blue eyes. "I can't hold it," she admitted calmly, "and I'm not so sure I want to hold it. No range is worth the bloodshed that has blackened the Circle L."

Lefty lounged against the door, his wide mouth twisted with derision. "So you jest don't have the spunk! Lobo spent twenty-thirty years building the spread; good men tasted lead tuh hold it, and you—you'd jest give it away." His voice hardened. The watching girl saw Lobo again in his cold eyes and stubborn jaw. "Wal, you aren't goin' to give it away—not while I'm around. And I'm stickin'—'til we give them bushwhackin' bustards their come-uppance."

"And then?" There was more curiosity than anger in the girl's even tones.

"I'm ridin'—south, mighty glad to get shut of this stinkin' valley."

"With your hands soaked in blood," she flung contemptuously.

"And proud of 'em!"

Impulsively, she crossed the room and stopped an arm's length from the stormy-faced rider. "Let's not fight!" she pleaded. "I know how you feel, Lefty, and—somehow—I'm proud of you. But don't you see how useless it all is? What do we gain from this everlasting conflict? What did your paw gain—a bullet! Couldn't we make terms with the Boxed R, and the other spreads? Give them some range—we have plenty. Give them back the water we stole from them—and live in peace!"

"It jest won't work out that way, Al." The anger had left his voice. "The more we give, the more they'll grab. They can't ferget their scars. We gotta fight—or quit."

"How can we fight—eleven men against sixty or more?"

"You leave that to me," he replied doggedly. "May I take over?"

Alice raised her shoulders in resignation, turned away. "If you wish, Lefty." Her voice was tired. "I suppose it's the way Paw would have wanted—bloodshed and bitterness."

Vaguely dissatisfied, Lefty wandered out to the bunkhouse, glowering at the card-littered table, the oddments of clothing discarded by the discharged riders, the empty rows of bunks. Eleven punchers left to hold three spreads at bay. Eleven guns against sixty or more hate-hardened waddies. And no chance of getting more. Who would take a job on the crumbling Circle L for the pleasure of becoming buzzard bait?

Spurs jingled behind him. He swung round to meet Porky Pawson's chubby countenance, wreathed with the inevitable smile. In his present frame of mind that smile prickled like a cholla patch.

"Wal?" he ejaculated.

" 'Pears we're short-handed?" Porky's jowls quivered with amusement.

"It isn't funny—as I see it."

"It shore ain't no use weepin'." There was a rasp in Porky's high-pitched voice that jangled on Lefty's nerves. It came to him again that the foreman's twin guns and small shrewd eyes were ill-matched by his vacant grin. Porky looked as soft as a simpering schoolgirl. Yet Lobo must have had good reason to make him segundo of the Circle L.

"You won't have much time to weep," said Lefty dryly. "You'll be too busy warming them twin guns."

"Not me!" Porky's chins shook with mirth.

"How come?"

"I make too big a target tuh git tangled up in a range war."

"So you're pullin' out!"

"Jest throwin' my hand in." The foreman's features creased with a fat smile. "Yuh cain't beat a full house with a deuce."

"Unless yore lucky on the draw."

"I never was lucky—but I'm mighty fast!" Porky still smiled, but his eyes were wary.

"How fast?" shot back Lefty.

The atmosphere was brittle now.

Porky chuckled again. "D'ye crave tuh find out?"

"Not right now," said Lefty slowly. "Maybe later. Ridin' far?"

"Reckon I'll lay around town—always did fancy the Chink's chuck. 'Sides, I'd like tuh see yore—draw." Flabby features crinkled with amusement, Porky swung away. With frowning eyes, Lefty watched his rotund form as he waddled across the yard on thick bowed legs. A dangerous man! Porky was no more scared of a fracas than a drunken puncher was of a saloon fight.

Lefty was convinced of that. The pudgy foreman's readiness to match cutters proved his nerve, and he had held down a hardboiled bunch on the Circle L. Yet he was pulling out. Guess, like everyone else, he figured the spread was sunk. For the first time, a leaden premonition of defeat weighed the thin rider's spirits. Maybe Porky was right. No one ever scooped the jackpot with a deuce; not when his opponents held kings. He'd run off at the mouth aplenty about holding the Circle L —but just how could he hold it? Disconsolately, he wandered over to the barn, picked up his coiled rope and slid between the corral poles. The remuda circled with tossing heads and flashing hoofs as he shook out a loop.

Chapter 6

LEFTY shook off his forebodings as he left the ranch behind and rode deep into the hill country that lay west of the Circle L. The old carefree spirit surged joyously through his body as he filled his lungs with the dry, exhilarating mountain air. Forgotten were feuds, killings, hatreds. He kneed the big claybank into a gallop, raised his voice and chanted, with more force than melody:

"Last night I lay on the prairie
An' gazed at the stars in the sky,
I wondered ef ever a cowboy
Could drift to the sweet bye and bye,
Roll on, little dogies, roll on

If he ain't pulled a gun on a puncher,
If he ain't never cheated at cards,
He may win through the final rodeo
If he's only been true to his pards,
Roll on, little dogies, roll on

But whatever the fate of the cowboy
When the last time, he—

"Wal, I'll be damned!"

The abrupt exclamation left his lips and the song was forgotten as the blowing claybank topped a swale at full gallop, and two riders on the flat ahead swept into sudden view. Both were afoot, their ponies ground-hitched near by. One hunkered beside a dun object. The other stood alert. A thin finger of smoke from a tiny fire quavered upward into the clear air. The story was plain to Lefty—rustlers, in broad daylight, on the Circle L range.

He reined the blowing pony down to a trot. His jaw clamped tight. An eager hand closed on the smooth stock of the Winchester in the saddle boot. Then, at a sudden thought, his features relaxed. He pulled back from the Winchester, his wide lips curved in a slow grin. Sight of the rustlers had clicked a solution to the Circle L troubles into his mind.

The lookout man, standing beside his hunkered companion, sighted the approaching rider. He grabbed his Stetson, swung it with a sweeping motion.

"Waving me around!" murmured Lefty. "Them hairpins shore got their gall."

He continued to approach at a steady jog trot. The rider hastily replaced his hat and stepped quickly towards his pony. Lefty caught the glimpse of sun on metal, as a rifle slid into view. A bullet pinged overhead and the sharp slap of the warning shot hit the oncoming Lefty's ears.

He raised his right arm high, palm foremost—the peace sign—and rode on.

Another bullet zipped into the sun-dried turf almost between the claybank's forelegs. Lefty saw the man beside the tied calf quickly uncoil and grab his pard's arm. The gun lowered.

Lefty was now close enough to distinguish the rustlers' features. One was tall, loosely knit, with freckled features. His dust-soiled Stetson was tilted back, revealing a tangle of sandy hair. The other, still holding his Winchester at the ready, was short and saturnine, with beady-black eyes.

The sandy-haired rider grinned as Lefty rode up. The Circle L man liked his looks—the devil-may-care glint in the smoky eyes beneath the sun-bleached eyebrows.

"Jaspers who don't savvy gun talk," he drawled, "are liable tuh be worm feed. You hankerin' f'r the Pearly Gates?"

"Nope," replied Lefty coolly, swinging out of leather. "All I hanker for is a powwow. That's why I rode in."

"Talk fast," growled the dark-featured rustler sourly. "I'm laying odds yuh don't ride out."

"Button up, Cherokee!" snapped the sandy-haired man. He stepped forward to meet Lefty, squinting against the sun. "Spread yore hand, stranger!" There was a bite in his voice now.

The tall rider glanced at the tied calf, then at the straight iron heating in the fire. "They string up jaspers for thet—on the Circle L range."

"Not no more," snarled the somber rustler. "Lobo's cashed in—the bustard! The Circle L is due tuh be hashed up." He darted a quick glance at the Boxed R brand on the claybank. "You oughta know thet!"

His dark eyes glinted above high cheekbones and he jerked up the sagging barrel of his rifle, as he glimpsed the threat in Lefty's eyes. Too late! The rider's hand

snaked down to his swiveled holster. The roar of the six-gun blended with a yelp of agony as the Winchester clattered to the ground and the beady-eyed rustler grabbed his right hand, ineffectually trying to stanch the blood that welled from a jagged red gash across his knuckles. In a flash Lefty spun to face the freckled rustler, whose six-gun was half out of leather.

"Drop it, amigo!" he barked.

Reluctantly, the freckled rider's fingers loosened and the gun thudded back into leather. His eyes twinkled, betraying no trace of fear. "Hell, yore fast!" he drawled. "It ain't no crime brandin' mavericks."

Lefty's rugged features creased in an answering grin. "Tell that to the judge!"

"Lawman, eh?"

"Nope, I rod the Circle L. They call me Lefty."

The tall rustler spat in disgust. "I shoulda let Cherokee drop yuh, when yuh rode in. Me, I'm as soft-hearted as a Siwash squaw—and look what it gits me!" He spread his hands in a gesture of comic despair.

"Set!" said Lefty shortly. "I wanna palaver."

The swarthy rider had wrapped his bandanna around his gashed hand and stood glaring at his assailant.

"You set in, too!" Lefty snapped. "And 'member my paw wasn't any bustard." The tied calf blatted plaintively. "Loose that—maverick, first."

Muttering, the dark man untied the piggin' strings awkwardly with his left hand. The animal scrambled to its feet and trotted away, bawling.

"And quit bellyachin'," advised Lefty. "I coulda dropped you."

The three hunkered in a circle.

"You got yore spurs tangled on the Circle L matter," began Lefty without preamble. "The first hombre who reaches to grab a chunk of my range is gonna burn his pothooks. And we aren't serving any hash! Now listen!

I can use a bunch of good men, handy with rope and gun, a hundred dollars a month and plenty action. Chew on thet!"

The sandy rider's right hand strayed towards the low-hanging pocket of his loose vest. Lefty's eyes followed it.

"Kin I smoke?" inquired the rustler plaintively.

"Sure, but steer clear of that gun butt."

The other carefully made a cigarette, passed it to his crippled pard, built another for himself. Lefty plucked a match from his hat brim with his right hand, struck fire and lit both.

For a while the pair puffed in silence.

"We kin make more—in the Bad Lands," commented the freckled rider finally.

"Sure!" Lefty grinned tightly. "The hard way—always on the lam, scared of every dust plume, holin' up like a coyote, never through dodgin' hemp. Give me a full belly, a good ridin' job, plenty dinero and a little action. It sure tops hootin'."

The rustler again reflected awhile. "Me, I'm 'most persuaded—'most." His voice was humorous.

"You aren't enough," Lefty returned offhandedly. "I gotta git a dozen or nothin'—hard-riding, straight-shootin' hombres. There's plenty on the dodge back there." He jerked his head towards the somber Apaches, a mighty rampart blocking the western horizon, simmering through the heat haze. "Bring 'em into the Circle L and I make you segundo at a hundred and fifty per. 'Member, when the job's cleaned up, you jaspers ride regular for the spread, if you hanker to."

"And ef I tell the Circle L tuh go tuh hell?" The sandy-haired rider's lips quirked, but there was bleak challenge in his eyes.

"Mister!" Lefty's voice was brittle as glass. "I aim to clean up the range—and that means you."

The other grinned. "Damned ef I don't figger yore the hombre tuh do it, Lefty. And when might we drift in—pervided we do drift in?"

"Tomorry isn't too soon—Sandy."

Sandy chuckled. "Hell, you got my moniker pat." He uncoiled his loose-knit form, waved nonchalantly to the calf, now standing off, staring back at the group with bovine curiosity. "Drift little dogie—we done reformed —mebbe."

The pair stepped up upon their ponies and hit towards the mountains. Lefty gazed after their jogging ponies thoughtfully, until they became mere dots bobbing over the swales, to finally dissolve into the blue haze.

Lady Luck had handed him another card; whether it was a trump time would show. He well knew the Bad Lands, a desolate chaos of canyons spread at the base of the Apaches, haunted by wanted men and others who preyed on the herds in the foothills. Many were criminals only by a twist of fate—the temptation of an unbranded calf, a drink too many, hasty gunplay. They were good men in a tight—and the Circle L was sure in a tight. A dozen men of Sandy's breed, added to the remnants of his crew, would give him a fighting chance to save the spread. Would Sandy bring them in? Lefty shrugged fatalistically and moved towards his pony . . . if the rustlers didn't take a hand the Circle L was through.

Tobacco smoke curled thick in Sheriff Waters' tin-roofed shack behind the Courthouse. Waters, long legs stretched out, slid deep down in his swivel chair, facing his two deputies, Dakota and Hippo. Knitted together by bonds forged in gunsmoke, the three were strikingly dissimilar in physical make-up. The sheriff was tall and lean. Dakota, swarthy and stocky, coppery skin betraying a strain of Indian blood. His inquisitive eyes were as

sharp as his tongue, and he could read sign like an Apache. Hippo bulked big as an ox. Slow in thought and action, he was a dependable man in a tight.

The sheriff dribbled smoke through his nostrils, frowning at the floor littered with cigarette butts. "Last killing we handled, thar warn't no motive, leastways not until we dug mighty deep. This killing—hell, we're swamped with motive. Never knew a jasper git so many on the prod as Lobo.

"Take this Lefty maverick. He busted outa the corral way back, didn't see eye to eye with the Old Man. Morning after he rides in, packin' two stiffs, Lobo's salivated. The pair locked horns the night before. Mebbe the Old Man ran a sandy over the prodigal, threatened tuh cut him outa his will. There's motive! Gunplay comes easy with Lefty."

"Yuh claimed the hairpin had an airtight alibi," shot in Dakota sharply.

"He claimed it was airtight, not me," corrected the sheriff evenly. "Said he spread his soogans at Willow Spring the night afore, bumped up against Kate Rogers and her foreman at sunup. I drifted over tuh the Boxed R. Both swear they never seed hair nor hide of the jasper."

"Which puts the deadwood on Lefty," boomed Hippo.

The sheriff patiently eyed the calendar on the wall, then continued. "I rode over tuh the Circle L tuh bring Lefty in—and he acted mighty surprised. Claimed some gent had blasted his bedroll at the Spring. Lefty's slick—he warn't inside. Showed me his roll—it was ripped some. The tree he said he slept under was bullet-scarred and he located these empties near the Spring." Waters fished four shells out of a pants pocket.

"Winchester—or .44," snapped Dakota, with a quick glance.

"He totes a .44." The sheriff felt for his tobacco sack.

"And dropped the cases afore he picked 'em up—f'r yore benefit," threw back his deputy.

"Yore guess is as good as mine," drawled the sheriff. "Now you tell us what yuh turned up around whar they found Lobo's body."

"Not more'n yuh could shake a stick at," complained Dakota. "Too many hombres trampin' around like a flock of woollies—with about as much hawse sense. Lobo was downed in a dip between two hills. Plenty cover on the slopes, mostly mesquite. I kin tell yuh this—a feller with a burro dropped down from the south slope. He pulled up 'side the body f'r a looksee, then beat it down the trail—fast. The burro was trottin'."

"Then it's plain—" Hippo unbottled again.

"F'r gosh sakes button up!" barked Dakota. "With you yappin', a feller cain't git a word in edgeways."

"Ef yuh spilled lead like yuh do words, you woulda been buzzard bait afore yuh started shavin'," rumbled his burly pard.

"You never did start shavin'," growled the other.

"Quit skallyhootin'," grunted Waters. "Now spill it, Dakota!"

"Wal, like I was sayin' afore Hippo butted in, the sign was muddied, plenty. But, clost tuh the trail, a dozen paces from Lobo, I dug up this—stamped in the dust." He produced a bone comb. "Wimmen use 'em tuh fix their hair. The Valley Merchandise Store carries a stock. Ain't sold none the past week."

Waters took the comb and examined it curiously. A number of teeth were broken off; apparently it had been crushed into the ground by a boot or a hoof. "Alice Bradford," he murmured.

"Warn't she Lobo's adopted daughter?" challenged Hippo. "She coulda pisoned him more easy. Whyfore should she beef the jasper—anyways?"

"Lobo smoked out her maw and paw—nesters—fried 'em to a crisp, way back," returned the sheriff musingly. "The gal's quiet, kinda broody. I lay she ain't forgot."

"Wal, Kate Rogers got equal cause," pointed out Hippo stubbornly. "Lobo cut down her paw. And thet wildcat ain't likely tuh fergit. No siree!"

"I ain't sayin' the comb was dropped recent," mused Dakota. "Mebbe laid there a day, mebbe a month. And ain't we fergettin' the gent with the burro?"

"Which gent?" Waters rasped his chin. "They drift in and outa town constant. The Apaches is thick with them—and outlaws. Them old desert rats is mostly harmless, 'cept when they licker up. Mebbe this gent was hittin' f'r the mountains and heard the shot." He fashioned another smoke. "Heah's another angle. Lefty beefed two Boxed R waddies, so he claims. Mebbe the Boxed R came back at his Old Man. Mighty neat job, ef they could pin it on Lefty."

"Hell!" snorted Dakota, "they's a dozen hombres craved the pleasure of slippin' a slug in thet Circle L wolf. He's been on the rampage f'r years."

"Ain't thet what I said?" returned Waters wearily. "They's enough motive in this case tuh choke a hawse. But it's murder and we gotta jug the killer. We kin lay off range wars, pervidin' they're strictly private, and pussonel gunplay's nobody's business, if it's on the up and up. But bushwhackin'! Thet's agin the law and no coyote, man or woman, is goin' tuh git away with it in Eagle Valley."

"Wal?" demanded Dakota derisively. "Who yuh gonna stick in the cooler—Lefty Lingren, Alice Bradford, Kate Rogers, every cowman Lobo pushed around? They all got motive—aplenty. Then they's the matter of prospectors. Yuh could round up quite a passel."

"You got an idea there," drawled the sheriff. "Cir-

culate around and git a line on what desert rats drifted in the past weeks."

"Lanky Lefevre, and Colonel Soothby of the Triple S been in town, hirin'," commented Hippo irrelevantly. "And a bunch of waddies quit the Circle L."

"Thet spread died with Lobo," said Dakota, "and damned good riddance!"

"Would yuh want tuh lay a little dinero on thet?" inquired the sheriff mildly. "Say, ten dollars?"

"Twenty dollars!" countered Dakota with alacrity. "It's a bet!"

"Wal, yuh ain't said who kilt Lobo?" rumbled Hippo.

"Lefty Lingren!" rasped Dakota. "Who else?"

"Would yuh wanna lay twenty dollars on thet?" asked Waters persuasively.

Dakota shot a sharp glance at the sheriff's bland features. "Hell, I ain't the Valley Bank!" he snorted.

Chapter 7

LEFTY scented trouble the moment he jogged into the Circle L yard. Sweat-streaked, a saddle pony was tied by the water trough. A grey-shirted rider rose from the shadow of the barn and lounged forward as the Circle L boss peeled out of leather.

"Triple S done pushed steers over Buckeye Creek," he drawled. "Regular war party ridin' herd on the critters, chuck wagon, 'n' everything."

Lefty listened impassively. So the offensive had been launched. Buckeye Creek had long been the south boundary of the spread. Beyond it lay country ranged

by Colonel Soothby's Triple S cows. The Colonel was an irascible ex-military man who had seen service in the Civil War and through South America. Sparks had been struck aplenty from the impact of his fiery temperament against the granite-like Lobo—until the Colonel had finally learned to leave well enough alone. Now, thought Lefty with a wry grin, it was a different story. Scarcely had the puncher imparted his laconic tidings when another rider stirred dust. He pounded around the house and released a yell at sight of the boss. He was young and his eyes telegraphed the excitement that seethed within. He yanked his pony to a spectacular stop, churning dust and pebbles, threw himself out of leather with the careless abandon of youth and jingled eagerly towards the two men by the water trough.

"Hell's a-poppin' at Willow Springs, boss!" he burst out. "Them Boxed R bustards are floodin' our water with their doggoned dogies. The hombres are real hostile. The blue whistlers was shore a-buzzin' when I split the breeze."

Lefty's rough-hewn features gave no indication of the cold chill that chased down his backbone, despite the sun flaming westward. Two had struck. Only the most dangerous, the Lazy J, to the east, remained. Jed Thorburn would be the last to move. The old Lazy J ramrod would probably straddle the fence and watch progress of the Boxed R and Triple S. If they went ahead unchallenged, he'd roll in with his waddies to grab his share—and once he started rolling, with thirty or more punchers, he'd crush the Circle L's weakened crew flat.

"Keeno!" grinned Lefty, when the young puncher had finished his breathless story. "Maybe the horse thieves bit off more'n they can chew. Stick around!"

With studied unconcern, he stripped the gear off his pony, set the saddle on the rack and loosed the claybank in the corral. Then he perched on the top rail to

consider the situation over a cigarette. The Circle L was up against it, there was no blinking the fact. The Boxed R mustered twelve punchers and the Triple S eight. Both had been hiring in town and had probably roped in the bulk of the Circle L quitters. That gave them at least twenty men against his twelve. His bunch was too small to split. The two raiding spreads were probably working in cahoots and if he threw his force against either, the other would hit him in the rear. Both the Colonel and Lanky Lefevre were seasoned fighting men, eager to strike a death blow. Besides, pondered Lefty with creased brow, he couldn't leave the home spread defenseless. The Circle L ranch house was built like a fort, but you had to man a fort. But the most menacing threat was Jed Thorburn with his thirty or more punchers. If he moved now the Circle L was doomed.

The tall rider squirmed restlessly on the smooth corral rail. He couldn't sit tight and allow the invaders to bite off chunks of Circle L range. If his shrunken crew lost confidence, he might find himself battling alone. He gnawed the butt of his cold smoke with bitter chagrin. He sure stepped into trouble when he rode north from the Rio Grande.

Again he dwelt upon the Lazy J and the looming threat of its overwhelming force. The Boxed R and Triple S had been mauled aplenty in the past by Lobo's sharp claws. They would move cautiously, whittling away Circle L range and paring down his shrunken crew. But Jed Thorburn was liable to bull right through —if he thought the time was ripe. The Lazy J boss and his father had long since ceased being actively hostile—just eyed one another across their boundaries like strange dogs, each waiting for the other to snap. But Jed was tough. If the Circle L crumbled, he'd get his.

Right now, figured Lefty, the old cowman was wait-

ing to pounce. But he was cautious. He would hold his riders in leash until he was convinced the Circle L was through. If the Lazy J forces could be kept off the Circle L range until he had a chance to handle the other two outfits, the spread had a chance for survival. Lefty groaned inwardly at his own impotence. What in heck could he do? What wouldn't he give for Sandy and another dozen hard-bitten riders!

Shadows snaked across the yard. The ridges greyed and, like files of skirmishers, cows drifted down valley to water. Two by two, Circle L waddies jingled in. From his perch on the corral rail, Lefty noted that the usual joshing and horseplay were absent as the men watered their mounts and racked their saddles. Their voices were low-pitched; covert glances were directed at Lefty's lean figure. It was plain that news of the onslaught of the Boxed R and Triple S had circulated around and the spirits of the crew were low.

What chance would he have, leading this bunch against long odds, reflected the Circle L boss—they were half-beaten already. Ten to one they'd be drifting over to the office after supper to draw their time. He had to do something—quick.

The cook's cleaver rang harshly upon an iron bar suspended outside the cookhouse. As solemnly as though they were preparing to attend the funeral of the Circle L, the crew washed up at the bench outside the mess shack and jingled inside. Lefty followed. There were many gaps down the long trestle table as the riders slid into their accustomed places, to sit subdued and silent. "F'r gosh sakes bunch up!" snapped the cook testily, surveying the spaced-out riders. "I gotta game laig and I ain't a-wearin' it to a stump runnin' races around this shack."

Without protest, the sober-faced punchers slithered sideways along the benches, packing at Lefty's end.

He reached for a steaming coffee pot and grinned cheerfully. "Wal, the Boxed R and Triple S sure grabbed a bear by the tail!"

Heads swiveled in frowning interrogation.

"Gotta big bunch of waddies ridin' in," he chuckled. "Pards of mine. Right soon we're due to run those flea-bitten coyotes back to their holes."

"Yuh don't hev tuh string us," growled a bony-faced rider.

"You're doggoned right I don't." Lefty gulped his coffee. "We got plenty good fightin' men on tap. Else why would I clean out those jaspers who have no stomach for gunsmoke?" He waved a careless hand. "The Circle L is due to go on the rampage—pronto."

"When are yore pards ridin' in, boss?" flung the excitable youth who had dodged lead at Willow Spring.

"Wal," Lefty pondered. "I wouldn't rightly know. They're on the trail. Should hit the spread by sundown tomorrow—maybe sooner."

"They'll be a welcome sight f'r sore eyes," grunted the bony-faced puncher. " 'Pears like the Boxed R is out f'r blood, and the Triple S is shore backin' their play."

Lefty observed with satisfaction that his announcement had instilled new life into the shrunken crew. The aura of hopelessness dissolved. As they filled their stomachs with food—and the Circle L chuck was good—the men's spirits visibly rose.

Behind his confident grin, Lefty's spirits sank in proportion. It was long odds that Sandy wouldn't come through. Even if he did, the odds were longer that he couldn't round up a bunch to side him. Well, decided the Circle L boss, he had trouble enough right now on his hands, without worrying about tomorrow. Likely the crew would stick for another twenty-four hours, and there was always the chance of a miracle. Again

the specter of a Lazy J invasion shadowed his mind. Heck, life on the Circle L was just one tight after another! Then he almost choked upon a mouthful of boiled beef as another idea struck him: If the Circle L crew would swallow a windy about a big bunch of fighting men heading to bolster up the spread, why wouldn't Jed Thorburn of the Lazy J? The old moseyhorn always coppered his bets. He'd sit tight if he thought there was a chance of walking into a bear trap.

Supper over, Lefty threw a saddle on the claybank and headed eastward. Thorburn's spread lay eight miles across the rolling hills. Overhead, the thick-sprinkled stars paled before a yellow moon. Somber quiet brooded over the range. At every turn of the trail Lefty half-expected to bump into the Lazy J's invading herds, but he saw nothing except the shadowy forms of Circle L steers, scattering before the steady tattoo of the claybank's hoofs.

Pinpoints of light pricked through the night, steadily growing in brilliancy until they materialized into the square-cut windows of Thorburn's ranch house. Lefty hit strung wire, followed the posts until he struck a lane, rode between fences and emerged into a wide yard. Barns bulked black around him. Shafts of light slanted from a long, low building and pooled on the chopped earth. The soft notes of a guitar floated to the rider's ears above the drone of voices in the bunkhouse. Opposite, lamplight outlined the windows of a squat frame building fronted by a wide porch. A glowing spot of scarlet moved slowly and rhythmically in a short arc through the gloom of the porch. For a moment Lefty stared in perplexity. Then he distinguished the vague bulk of a man in a rocker, moving slowly back and forth as he smoked a cigar in the cool of the night.

"Hello the house!" he yelled. "Jed Thorburn around?"

"Yore talkin' tuh the gent, mister," boomed a deep voice. "Light and rest yore laigs."

Lefty stepped down and trailed his reins, and jingled up the porch steps.

The Lazy J boss inclined his head towards another rocker. "Set down!"

In the half-light, the Circle L man stumbled over a litter of saddlery, grabbed for the rocker, steadied and sank into it. He remembered Jed of old, a heavy-set, impassive figure, features dark as mahogany, stubborn as a bull, tough as hickory. A bachelor, he had built the Lazy J from a handful of cows to a far-flung spread. Some said that in his younger, more reckless days a running iron had helped plenty. But Jed had grown cautious, very cautious, with affluence and age.

"'Member me?" A match blazed as Lefty lit his smoke.

"Yore the spit of Lobo—twenty years back. A Lingren boy, mebbe."

"Lefty Lingren. I jest drifted back from the border—and some sidewinder bushwhacked Paw."

News travels fast by range telegraph. Thorburn was well acquainted with happenings on the Circle L—and gossip had it that Lefty was the killer. He merely grunted. Lobo's death was the sheriff's business.

"Half the crew took a powder," continued Lefty. Thorburn could have told him that four were in the Lazy J bunkhouse right then. "And the Boxed R and Triple S are movin' in."

"Ain't thet too bad!" The old cowman drew slowly at his cigar.

"Too bad for those range hogs," countered Lefty. "I gotta bunch of gunnies hired." He rose. "Wal, Jed, it's mighty nice meetin' you!"

"Set down!" urged Thorburn. "Hell, you jump around like a grasshopper."

Lefty grinned in the darkness. The old catawampus was rising to the bait. He dropped back into the rocker.

"Hey, have a seegar!" The cowman fumbled at his shirt pocket.

"Thanks, Jed, but I was weaned on coffin nails."

"About this bunch of gunnies you claim you roped in. Ain't no guns f'r hire in Indian Wells," rumbled Thorburn.

"Did I say I hired 'em in town?"

"Yuh shore didn't round 'em up in Wildcat!"

"Maybe I brought 'em with me," drawled Lefty.

"Mebbe!" returned the cowman dryly.

Again Lefty rose. "Wal, I gotta drift. Watch the Circle L; fireworks are due to pop. And I'm not crossin' any boundaries—eastward."

He picked his way gingerly through the scattered saddlery on the porch and descended the steps. As he reined the claybank round, he glanced back. The cigar still glowed scarlet, but it was still. Jed Thorburn had quit rocking and was thinking—hard. Lefty was ready to stake his saddle that threat of those gunnies would induce the Lazy J owner to wait awhile before swamping Circle L range.

In high spirits, the rider left the ranch behind and headed westward. Then a sober thought intruded. True, he was still holding cards in the poker game, with the Circle L as the jackpot; but soon, too soon, he'd have to spread his hand—and the cards he held weren't worth a beer check.

It was close upon midnight when he pulled out of the hills and hit the flats that fronted the Circle L. Frowning from the bench beyond against the silvered ridges, the ranch lay still and lifeless in the moonlight. Even the saddle stock, blotched black shadows in the corral, stood motionless, dozing.

Sudden movement stirred the ponies. A shrill whinny

drifted through the quiet night. Lefty glimpsed a moving figure in the corral. He pricked his jogging pony. Why was a puncher cutting out his pony at midnight? What was afoot?

The nocturnal rider disappeared behind the barn, leading a pony. Upon sudden impulse, Lefty checked the claybank, reined behind a mesquite clump and sat motionless—waiting.

Hoofs drummed dully upon sun-hardened earth. He eased forward and peered through the laced branches. The night rider emerged from the shadows around the house, angled towards him, following the curving wagon road across the flats. The amazement in Lefty's eyes grew. The stranger was forking Al's pony—the animal's white nose showed plain in the moonlight. Then, after intent scrutiny, an incredulous oath trembled upon the watcher's lips. The rider was Al herself!

For a moment, Lefty was tempted to pull out from the cover of the clump and intercept the girl. A growing curiosity held him back. He watched Al ride leisurely along the wagon road.

Movement on the far side of the flats caught his eye. A figure slowly pulled out from a fold in the hills, tailed by a burro. At that moment a vagrant cloud drifted across the moon, casting a grey veil over the scene and mantling both the girl and the man afoot. The impatient Lefty could do no more than squint into the obscurity, waiting for the cloud to pass. If he emerged from the shelter of the mesquite clump, chances were he would be sighted.

When moonlight once again flooded the flats, the girl and the mysterious visitor were together. She had dismounted and the pair stood close.

For fifteen minutes or more Lefty watched, forehead creased. Then Alice Bradford swung lightly into her saddle, wheeled and headed back for the ranch. The

man afoot struck up valley on a course that would take him within fifty paces of Lefty's cover. The rider watched his progress—the deliberate, unhurried stride of a trail-seasoned man who knew well the axiom that "he who hurries in the desert, hurries to his death."

The strange features were now plain in the moonlight. Lefty's amazement grew. He had seen that face before—it was the wizened, hatchet-faced prospector who had saved his life near Thunder Pass—the desert rat who hated the guts of the Lingren clan.

Chapter 8

WHEN the flats were again devoid of life, except for grazing steers, Lefty emerged from cover and pulled for the ranch. His triumph at the Lazy J was forgotten, crowded out of mind by the new perplexity. What was the bond between Al and the prospector—an avowed enemy of the Circle L? Why did the girl slip out at midnight to meet the desert rat? Was she—the thought struck with the stunning force of a bullet—a traitor to the spread?

He walked his pony into the silent yard, watered and loosed it in the corral. The ranch house, where Al lived alone, was darkened. Lefty curbed an urge to summon his step-sister and demand an accounting for her actions. Better wait—and watch—he decided. Doubt as to her identity still lingered in his mind. If it were not for the evidence of his own eyes, he would have staked his saddle that she was on the square. To make doubly sure,

he entered the dark portals of the barn, found her saddle blanket and fingered it. It was damp with sweat.

Deeply troubled, he walked slowly towards the bunkhouse. Al was the last person in Eagle Valley he would have suspected of 'crossing the spread. To him, she was part of the Circle L. For years she had been his father's standby, quietly and methodically running the house. Before he had pulled out for the Border she had ridden the range with him and his brothers, fished in Buckeye Creek, shot cottontails, stalked fleet black-tailed deer. Thought of her treachery stabbed deep. He would have been less perturbed if it had been his brother.

Wearily, he tugged off his boots in the gloom of the bunkhouse. What was the sense of straining his guts to save the spread when the girl who would inherit it was a double-crosser? Why not pull out and leave the whole danged mess behind? There was dinero and action aplenty down on the Rio Grande. He was a knothead to have ridden north again. Let George carry the load—it was his job; he was the eldest son. Lefty's ingrained sense of humor bubbled up through the fog of pessimism. The only load the burly George could carry was a load of booze.

The movement of men awoke him. Grey light straggled through the doorway. In the semi-darkness, punchers were morosely struggling into their pants, tugging on tight boots, fumbling at belt buckles. Limpy's cleaver jangled harshly through the dawn, and the crew swished out like water from a bottomless bucket.

Lefty rolled out of his soogans. When he took his seat at the end of the table, the waddies were demolishing bacon and beans, flapjacks and molasses. Doubt and depression were gone. The new day found him eager for action, ready to play his hand to the last card. Lefty's optimism could never be smothered for long.

Dishes cleaned of chuck, the punchers built their inevitable cigarettes, lounged outside and hunkered around, awaiting orders. Lefty dispatched two apiece north, south and east; north to check on the Boxed R, south to keep cases on the Triple S and east to watch the Lazy J. That left him six men. These he held to await the promised bunch of new hands—he was still banking on his hole card, Sandy. It was a long bet, but there was nothing else to tie to.

Immediate duties disposed of, Lefty sauntered over to the house. Alice, as usual, was busy—he could never remember seeing her idle. When he pushed into the kitchen, she was kneading a mass of dough in a large pan, sleeves tucked up and flour powdered white upon her arms. She greeted her visitor with a cheerful "Good morning!"

Mighty cool, thought Lefty. Pretty as a heart flush, too, in spite of a dab of flour upon her nose.

"Moon was uncommon bright last night," he commented, leaning against the wall and eyeing her closely. Her dark eyes came up quickly, met his steady survey unafraid.

"Do you notice the moon?" There was a tinkle of amusement in her even tones. "I thought your mind was on other, weightier matters—killing, for example."

"I notice plenty," he returned with curt emphasis on the final word.

"Such as?" The girl's attention was on the dough she vigorously kneaded.

Again Lefty checked an impulse to hurl accusations at his step-sister. The happenings of the previous night now seemed remote, unreal. If it hadn't been for the sweated saddle blanket he would have sworn he was dreaming when he crossed the flats. It just didn't make sense that Al, cool and competent, with everything to

lose if the Circle L went under, could be conspiring to wreck it.

"They's flour on your nose," he responded, with a chuckle.

"Dear me, I never dreamed you had such powers of observation." She hastily smudged off the flour with the corner of her apron. "Well, how is the battle going?"

"Reckon you heard about the Boxed R and Triple S tromping over our range?"

She nodded. "And also about a band of mysterious riders who are supposed to ride in. Do they exist—except in your imagination?"

Her smile took the sting out of the question, but again suspicion flooded the tall rider. Looked like she was fishing for information.

"I don't get you," he replied slowly.

"I'm no fool, Lefty," she replied composedly. "Unless you can instil hope in the few men you have left, they'll quit. But you can't bluff them forever."

Movement stirred in the yard outside. Through the window Lefty glimpsed men crowding the bunkhouse doorway, staring. He heard the clatter of many hoofs, the tinkle of conchas. Scarcely daring to hope, he moved quickly across the kitchen and pushed the neat white curtains to one side. Riders streamed into the yard; tough, sun-scorched men, bleak eyes wary beneath the brims of their stained Stetsons. At their head rode Sandy, a half-grin upon his freckled features.

Lefty's heart leaped. He could have shouted from sheer exhilaration of spirits. The hole card had proved to be an ace! Eyes shining, he tallied them—eight, ten, twelve, fourteen tough fighting men. Then he became aware that Al was standing beside him, her smooth forehead wrinkled.

"Who's bluffin' now?" he demanded.

"I can scarcely believe my eyes," she murmured. "Wherever did you find them?"

"You'd never guess," he chuckled. "Now we'll show the world the Circle L packs a wallop." He flung open the kitchen door and stepped out into the floating dust.

"Hey, you old carrion crow!" he yelled to the grinning Sandy. "You're late for breakfast."

"Shore could swallow a cup of cawfee," replied the freckled rider solemnly.

"Dump your soogans in the bunkhouse and wash the trail dust off your maps," beamed Lefty. "We'll pump coffee down your gizzards 'til you founder."

By noon, Lefty's scouts were back. No action on the Lazy J line. Boxed R cows were now grazing beyond Willow Spring; Triple S had made a permanent camp on Buckeye Creek. The two punchers who had cased Willow Spring came back at a walk, riding double. A Boxed R slug had crashed a pony.

But nothing could dampen Lefty's spirits now. He grinned cheerfully at the dust-smothered riders. "Grease your trigger-fingers, boys; plenty quick we'll serve those bustards some of their own bullet broth."

An hour later, he and Sandy hit south for Buckeye Creek. As the pair jogged through the sun-scarred hills, Lefty outlined the situation to his newly-made segundo. To his surprise, the freckled rider was as well acquainted with the lay of the land as he was.

"You kinda know your way around," he commented gruffly.

"Acquainted with most every rock," acknowledged the sandy puncher. "Thet's what comes of ridin' nights," he added dryly.

The shallow waters of Buckeye Creek meandered eastward from the mountains. Midway across the southern boundary of Circle L range, a past upheaval had thrown a barrier in the path of the lazy waters in the

form of a great granite pile that dammed further progress. As though angered by the obstacle, the broad creek, forced into a narrow channel, was transformed into a deep, seething torrent, swirling around the great mound in a wide semicircle, to resume again its languid course down the wide valley beyond.

Ahead of the two riders, a ridge rimmed the skyline. Below its crest, Lefty pulled rein and stepped down. The two tied their ponies and toiled upward afoot. Silver spruce rose slim around them. Grouse rustled through the brush and a woodpecker rattled a brisk tattoo above their heads.

They hit the summit and sprawled in the cool shade, eyeing the valley spread below. Not much sign of trouble here, ruminated Lefty. The terrain sloped gently down to the willow-bordered creek, the lazy waters of which sparkled in the sunlight. Cows bunched thick in the shade of the patched timber. A pony ambled along the creek bank, its rider slouching, half-asleep, in the saddle.

Lefty adjusted his spyglass, searching for brands on the cows. "Triple S," he growled. Movement in a grove of mountain oak beyond the creek caught his eye. He scrutinized the grove silently for several minutes. Through the glass, a chuck wagon showed plain amid the trees; behind it a row of tethered ponies. Lefty visualized the riders stretched out in the shade, primed for action. Then he scanned the length of the creek, pondering. Finally, he lowered the glass and turned to Sandy, propped on his elbows beside him. "We got the coyotes in a jack pot," he announced.

"They don't seem bothered none," returned the freckled rider.

"Their worries are ahead. Now listen!" Lefty pointed. "This side of Buckeye is Circle L range; the creek's the boundary. They've pushed plenty beef over, there's not

a Circle L steer in sight." His arm swung eastward to where, a mile or more below, a huge mound towered above the trees. "Lamp that pile of rock?"

"Flinthead Butte," replied Sandy promptly.

"Wal, the creek swings north around its base, rip-roaring like a mad bull, with cutbanks twenty feet high."

Sandy nodded indulgently.

"Let's say our boys stage a drive eastward along this side of the creek—hazing the Triple S critters ahead. Where'll they end up?"

"Over the cutbank, teacher," drawled the other.

Lefty spread his hands. "Wal, didn't I say the Triple S was in a jack pot?"

Sandy grinned. "Say, boss, you was so plumb anxious tuh give them cows a swim you forgot the Triple S crew, of which one is keepin' cases on the critters right now. When you hit the cows, the Triple S hits you. Cain't yuh see 'em boiling across thet creek?"

"Aw—hell, they won't cross the creek," returned Lefty absently, his glass in play again.

"It ain't more'n fetlock high, and sandy bottom."

Lefty grinned. "Wal, you old catawampus, jest suppose they couldn't cross the creek. Wouldn't there be plenty Triple S beef floatin' downstream?"

"You bet yore life there would," chuckled Sandy; "but them there hairpins ain't playin' supposin'."

"They will—tonight," said Lefty confidently, "but you won't be there to see it."

"Come agen!" There was brittle resentment in the freckled rider's voice.

"I got another job for you." Lefty rolled over to a tree trunk, propped his back against it and fished out the makin's. With the long-deferred action imminent, he felt supremely content. "I figgered we'd have to ride north to Willow Spring, where the Boxed R's on the

rampage, but I guess you know the lay of the land thereabouts."

"Every doggoned cowpath," Sandy assured him.

"Here's my idea for their come uppance." He paused, eyeing his segundo with quirked lips. "Lanky Lefevre's the brains of the Boxed R. How would you figger if you were settin' Lanky's saddle, with your cows eatin' Circle L grass?"

Sandy cocked his head like a squirrel contemplating a ripe nut, but dubious of grabbing it for fear of a trap. "Wal," he ventured finally, "I'd figger on a blast from the Circle L, mebbe a hell-raising night attack tuh push the critters back. I'd shore hev plenty guards ridin' ahaid of them cows."

"Shore," chuckled Lefty. "Isn't that plain horse-sense? Wal, you and six of your saddle-wallopers are gonna do different—you're gonna injun *behind* the cows. Then you're gonna hightail 'em, deep into Circle L range, circle 'em west and scatter 'em in the Bad Lands —and I sure mean scatter. By the time the critters drift back to the Boxed R they'll be skin and bone, not worth more'n their hides."

Sandy sucked his cigarette, chewing on Lefty's plan. "And Lanky's night guards?" he queried.

"Ever been ahead of a stampede?" shot back the wiry rider. "You feel as helpless as a day-old calf. Nothing to do but give yore horse his head and hope to hell he wouldn't step in a badger hole. When that passel of scared longhorns streaks down Willow Gulch, the night guards'll git like greased lightning if they don't crave to be chopped underfoot."

Sandy's lips twisted; he shook with silent laughter as he grasped the adroitness of Lefty's plan. The Boxed R would be primed for an attack from the front, never from the rear. Which meant the guards would ride ahead of the invading cows. If those cows stampeded

ahead, the riders would be lucky to escape with their lives. "B'gawd, boss," he acknowledged, "you shore figger things.—It's a cinch!"

"That's up to you.—Six men plenty?"

"I kin handle it with three."

"Take six and an extra saddle horse apiece. I want the legs run off thet Boxed R beef and I want it run to hell-and-gone." Lefty rose and stretched. "Wal, we've blowed off plenty wind; let's go get some action!"

There was a sparkle in Lefty's blue eyes when he glanced down the supper table that sundown. Once again the mess shack was packed with Circle L riders. More than that, the air of hopeless depression that had previously enveloped the crew was gone, succeeded by a spirit of hilarity and confidence. The influx of new men, coupled with the self-assurance that radiated from their lean, square-jawed boss, had rekindled hope. No longer did Lefty feel that he was fighting a desperate battle to keep a sinking spread afloat. He thrilled to the exhilaration of attack—defense would take care of itself. No details of the night's plans had been given the crew, but the eager-eyed punchers sensed that action was afoot.

Supper plates emptied, belts were loosened and cigarettes rolled, but no man left his seat. Eyes strayed towards Lefty, then were averted with studied unconcern.

He pushed away his plate. Two dozen heads swiveled as his voice rose. "T'night, boys, the Circle L goes on the warpath. Sandy here is segundo, from now on. He brought in a passel of mighty good men, and they's more where they came from. He rides against the Boxed R. Sandy, grab your six men!"

The freckled rider straightened and tallied off his crew.

"Beat it," said Lefty crisply, "and best o' luck!"

Sandy and his force jingled out into the yard.

"Now I want a dozen more to take south for a little fracas with the Triple S. Six men gotta stick around and watch the spread. Who's ridin'?"

Benches toppled and banged to the floor as every man shot up like a rocket.

"Cut for it," grinned Lefty, "and saddle up in ten minutes. If any of you jaspers lacks shells, drop over to the office."

In the thickening gloom of the yard he watched Sandy and his six men jog away, each with a led pony. Jubilant shouts mingled with disgusted curses in the bunkhouse as the remainder of the crew cut their luck. With broad grins the winners flowed out, grabbed their ropes and disappeared into the dusk of the corral.

"Where are all those men riding—at this time of day?" Lefty swung around at sound of Al's voice. His mouth opened, he was about to narrate his plans eagerly, when recollection of the scene in the moonlight returned.

His jaw muscles hardened. "Reckon we gotta keep cases on what range we got," he growled.

"Do the men need spare saddle horses to do that?"

"Least said soonest mended," he snapped, and moved towards the confusion of riders saddling fractious ponies by the corral gate.

Quickly, she was beside him. "What's wrong, Lefty, don't you trust me?"

"Got no time for yammerin', right now," he returned curtly.

Her slim form stiffened. "At least I have the right to know where my own crew is riding!"

"You get right back to the kitchen, Al," he advised her coldly. "That's where a woman belongs."

For a moment she stood irresolutely, eyeing his stubborn features in the dim light. Then, without further words, she pivoted upon her heel and moved away.

Lefty released a sigh of relief and hastened across the

yard. His dozen men were mostly in the saddle now, milling around. He swung open the door of the storeroom beside the blacksmith shop and emerged with two heavy coils of smooth wire. These he packed to the saddled claybank and hooked on the horn.

"All you jaspers heeled?" he shouted. A chorus of affirming grunts and shouts came back.

"Then let's ride!" He stepped up on the claybank and led the jingling cavalcade out into the night.

Chapter 9

SILENT as the shadows that patched the slope, the Circle L contingent bunched beneath the spruce below the crest of the ridge that frowned down upon Buckeye Creek. On the ridge top, Lefty was taking a final look-see, checking on the invaders before launching his attack. The valley was flooded with moonlight. Cows drifted contentedly over the benches. Across the creek, the reflection of a campfire gleamed ghostly through the limbs of the squat oaks. Not a rider was visible, but the Circle L boss had a shrewd idea that there were plenty Triple S waddies on the alert.

He wheeled his pony and dropped down to the waiting Circle L punchers. At his signal they grouped around him, as eager as hounds on the scent. He swung out of the saddle and lifted the two coils of wire off the horn.

"You fellers all know the layout yonder." He jerked his head towards the ridge top, rising dark behind them. " 'Specially by night," he added, with a grin that brought

answering chuckles from a scattering of Sandy's rustlers. "There's a passel of Triple S beef this side of the creek and a bunch of waddies camped the far side. And I gamble there's two or three night guards drifting over the slopes. Our job is to stampede that stock downstream and over the cutbank at Flinthead Butte. That's easy, but this isn't." He held the coils of wire high. "First we gotta fence out the Triple S crew. A single strand'll do the trick, strung knee high down the creek bank. When the Triple S boys come a-flyin', their ponies are liable to tangle some. Three'll string wire from upstream, three down. The job'll call for silence, in big gobs. If the Triple S gets wise afore we're through—wal, we're through! Afoot, we'll stop so much lead we'll sink in brine. Now, who craves to string wire?"

Elbowing, the men around packed tight, all striving to grasp the smooth coils. "For gosh sakes, quit pawin'!" gasped Lefty, in the center of the press. "Unstrap your spurs—first five goes!"

Spurs were never shucked as speedily in Circle L history. Lefty picked his men, dispatched three with one coil to slip down to the creek and work upstream, and led the way uphill with two more. Ghosting through the scattered timber and sliding along the shadows, Lefty and his two punchers finally reached the shelter of the low-hanging willows on the creek. On their way down the benches they had sighted several night guards riding a shoulder of the ridge, watching the grazing cows below.

Screened by the drooping willows that grew thick along the creek, Lefty and his helpers started swiftly stringing their wire, working from tree to tree, leaving a taut slender strand behind them. They moved fast. If the guards should be relieved before their job was done, or before the stampede started, each man well knew that

their chance was gone. Afoot, it was long odds they'd never reach their ponies alive.

But no whistling bullet or startled challenge shattered the quiet that caressed the little valley. The rippling of the creek smothered sound of their cautious movements; the coil of wire rapidly grew slimmer—and the taut trip wire longer.

A crackling in the brush ahead brought the sweat down Lefty's spine. It might be a cow—or a suspicious Triple S waddie. With a sign to his two helpers to lay low, he injuned through the trees, a rock tight-clenched in his fist. A shot, even a shout, would raise an alarm and ruin his plans.

More rustling ahead, twigs snapped; he heard the murmur of a voice, deep and low-pitched. Lefty crouched, fingers of his left hand frozen on his missile. Shadows glided through the brush; a puncher flitted across an open space. Lefty's lungs deflated in a sigh of relief and the rock dropped from his relaxed fingers as the moonlight gleamed upon coiled wire. The two wire-stringing parties had met. The job was done.

Now that the most ticklish part of the night's work was completed, the bees began to buzz in Lefty's belly. The first Triple S puncher to cross Buckeye Creek would foul the wire, and wreck his plans. As he skulked up the benches behind his five men, nerves as taut as the trip wire, every sound was magnified in his straining ears, every shadow held a potential enemy. But Lady Luck still smiled—the peacefulness of the night was unbroken.

Again in the saddle, the lean Circle L boss led his crew, in single file, up the slope. Gaining the crest, he wheeled westward, then dipped down into Buckeye basin. Still unobserved, the Circle L party strung out creekward. A wide-spaced line of dots, each trailed by an elongated shadow, they swung eastward, shook their

ponies into a lope and started their drive. Discovery meant nothing now.

Of a sudden, a gunshot from a startled guard split the night. With wild yippees, the dragnet of Circle L riders spurred their mounts to a gallop. Six-guns blared above the tattoo of pounding hoofs. A line of yelling madmen, they swept down the narrow valley. Then a deeper, more ominous sound echoed through the hills, gathering in magnitude every moment and drowning the puny yelling of the raiders in rolling reverberations of growling thunder—the terror-stricken bellowing of spooked cows and the rumble of their headlong flight before the demons who charged out of the silent night.

Lefty, in the center of the line of yelling punchers, never saw a guard. Before him, the slopes seemed to be smothered with the plunging bodies of hightailing steers. Below, to the right, ran the creek—and the wire.

Faint yells echoed across the water. The tall rider checked his claybank, dropped back out of line and kneed his pony towards the creek. Now that the panicky herd was on the run, nothing could stop its blind charge. He gained the shelter of the willows, reined up in the shadows and watched a stream of riders emerge from the oak grove. Urging their mounts with voice and spur, the Triple S punchers cascaded into the shallow stream. Water sprayed high around the plunging ponies. Those in the forefront scrambled up the bank, stretched out in frantic pursuit of the fast-moving cows—tripped and were flung to the ground with flailing hoofs as they hit the hidden wire. In a flash, the creek bank was a scene of wild confusion—battered punchers crawling clear of threshing ponies; horses rearing, tripping, screaming; puzzled riders in the rear wheeling and yelling.

Lefty set spurs to the claybank and pounded in the wake of his raiders, now swallowed in the dust of the

vanishing herd. Ahead, square and somber, rose Flinthead Butte.

Vague outlines of mounted men, reined up upon the brink of what seemed a black chasm, took shape ahead. Lefty pulled his pony down. This was where the creek hit the flanks of the granite pile and angrily foamed around its base. He halted on the edge of the cutbank. The earth was cut and scoured by countless sharp hoofs, where the fear-crazed steers had smashed ahead in blind panic, dashed over the steep cutbank and plunged down into the angry waters. The rider peered through the slow-settling dust—and an involuntary exclamation of horror left his lips. The fast-flowing creek was literally dammed with heaving bodies. The gasps and bellows of drowning steers rose in agonized chorus. Downstream, the deep narrow waters, pent between high banks, were thick with swimming cows. Many animals frantically pawed the walls of earth that penned them, before sinking into the swirling stream. Dun bodies of drowned animals botched the sullen surface, rolling with the current.

Strung along the bank, Circle L punchers stared silently down into the death trap. All the jubilation had left their bronzed faces—the stampede had succeeded only too well.

"Let's go!" ejaculated Lefty curtly. He pulled away from the scene of slaughter and led his subdued punchers northward. The Circle L had sure trumped the Triple S ace that night, he thought somberly, and a passel of fine steers had paid the penalty. But more than the wiping out of a Triple S herd embittered his spirits. Among the riders who hit the trip wire on Buckeye Creek he had sighted Porky Pawson and his brother George.

As the bunch of riders jogged through the hills, memories of his former carefree life on the Border pushed

into their rangy leader's mind. Savagely, he cursed the fate that had brought him back to Eagle Valley, to tangle in its bitter rivalries. His father had battled for years, spilled blood aplenty, to build the Circle L. And what had it brought the old Lobo? A bullet! And that's what it would bring him—in the end. Right now his own brother was lined up against him, and the girl Lobo had entrusted with the ranch was dickering with his enemies. To cap it all, the very rustlers Lobo had tracked down and shot like coyotes were facing lead to save the spread. Again, Lefty vowed mentally that he'd beat it out of Eagle Valley—just as soon as he could drift and save his face.

They rode into the darkened spread and unsaddled by moonlight. The bunkhouse was agog with talk as the night riders painted highly colored pictures of the fracas for the benefit of their stay-at-home—and envious—pards. Gradually silence settled as the punchers slid beneath their soogans.

While tired men snored around him, Lefty sought sleep in vain. The fate of Sandy and the six men who had ridden with the freckle-faced puncher to Willow Spring lay too heavy upon his mind . . . And he could not forget those drowning cows. By now, he conjectured, staring into the darkness, Sandy's men should be deep in the Bad Lands, sweeping a herd of Boxed R steers before them. But Lady Luck was capricious. She had smiled upon the Circle L at Buckeye Creek, maybe she turned thumbs down on Sandy. Lanky Lefevre was a tough tarantula, seasoned in a score of skirmishes with Lobo. He may have sprung a joker on the raiders.

A dozen times the Circle L boss jerked up in his bunk, every nerve set ajangle by a sound outside—the stamping of a pony, the bellow of a cow, the creaking of the windmill as the blades spun in a puff of breeze. A dozen times his strained eyes surveyed the moon-flooded yard

through the open doorway, hoping, yet fearing, one of the riders who had hit for Willow Spring had ridden in. Common sense told him that Sandy's party, if it had cleaned up on the Boxed R, could not reach the ranch again before sunup, but reaction from the strain of the past few days left him wide-eyed and sweating from every night sound.

Before dawn, Lefty was afoot, moving restlessly around in the grey gloom. An alarm clock whirred in the cookhouse, where Limpy bunked. Shortly after, light glowed sickly yellow through the dusty windows, smoke straggled from the stovepipe, pans rattled. Limpy's long day had started.

Lefty eased open the cookhouse door and stuck his head inside. Limpy, feeding chunks of wood into the big iron stove, twisted his head and scowled. "F'r gosh sakes, don't yuh ever sleep?" he inquired sourly.

"Not with seven men to be heard from." Lefty strove to achieve a cheery grin. "Any chance of a mug of dip?"

"Gawd knows why I ever froze onto this job," moaned the cook. "Ain't nuthin' but work, work, work from sunup tuh sundown, breakin' me back throwin' chuck inter the big bellies of a bunch of wuthless saddle-pounders. And now yuh got me dishin' up cawfee afore sunup! Oh, hell!" he added resignedly. "Set down; it'll be ready pronto, ef this pesky stove ever draws."

Lefty's spirits rose as the warmth from the scalding coffee percolated through his weary frame. He set down the empty cup. "How come you drifted into pot rustling?" he inquired, feeling for the makin's.

Limpy swung around, the spoon in his hand spilling flapjack batter. "Kin yuh ride—with a peg laig?" he demanded.

"I reckon not," acknowledged Lefty soothingly, as he glimpsed the bitterness in the crippled cook's eyes.

A sudden frenzy seemed to grip Limpy, as though deep-seated irritations festering through the years at last had found an outlet and burst through. His thin voice rose with shrill passion. "Yore paw done thet—damn his rotten carcass!"

Lefty straightened, stood stiff as a fence post, his blue eyes cold. "Cut thet talk!" he snapped.

"T'hell with yuh—yuh cain't stop my yawp." Long-rankling resentment venomed Limpy's voice. His thin face, etched deep with frustration, was outthrust towards his boss. Seething passion whirled him helplessly in a raging flood of accusation. Oblivious to the gathering storm in Lefty's eyes, he shrilled on. "Yore paw smashed thet laig—crippled me f'r life. For why? I had my rope on a Circle L steer—and the buzzard owned so many he couldn't count the critters. Give me the choice of serving Circle L chuck or swingin'. Ef he hadn't been short a cook I'd have decorated a tree. Lobo wouldn't have give a damn. Tuh hell with him and all the mangy Lingrens, I say. Now plug me—Lobo!"

Breathless, exhausted, he collapsed against the stove, glaring at Lefty's still figure.

For moments the tall rider stood as though carved from rock, considering Limpy's words. Then slowly, his left arm crooked. Silently, but as remorselessly as fate, his fingers tightened upon the smooth butt of his gun and the holster swiveled up.

"Did—you—beef—Paw?" His voice, flat and emotionless, was little higher than a whisper, but every slow-paced word was as clear-cut as a cameo.

The cook's wild wave of passion eddied as quickly as it had swept over him. His lined features suddenly straightened, sobered, as he stared into the black muzzle of the six-gun and heard the hammer click back beneath the pressure of the rock-faced Lefty's thumb.

"This is it!" There was cold finality in the rider's voice.

"F'r the love of Gawd, Lefty, don't shoot!" implored the ashen-faced cook. "I musta gone crazy—a feller kin go crazy, jest thinkin'. I never plugged yore paw. I was jest runnin' off at the mouth." Words gushed from his throat, then stopped suddenly as he glimpsed death in Lefty's eyes.

"Did you use a six-gun or a Winchester on Lobo?"

"I tell yuh, Lefty, I didn't beef him." Limpy was wringing his hands, almost sobbing now. "I ain't had my paws on a gun since—" he paused.

"Since when?"

Chapter 10

IRON-SHOD hoofs clattered in the yard outside. Leather creaked as weary men heaved out of their saddles. The door banged open and Sandy sauntered in, freckled features lined with fatigue and garb dust-powdered. Triumph twinkled in his tired eyes. "How about another cup of cawfee?" he drawled.

Lefty's hand dropped away from the gun butt. His taut nerves relaxed at sight of the gangling rider.

"You get away with the herd?" he ejaculated eagerly.

Sandy's wide mouth twisted in its habitual lazy grin. "Hide and hoof, boss. Willow Spring is so plumb deserted thet I gamble them Boxed R waddies rattle around like a pair of dice in an empty barrel. We hazed them steers so deep in the Bad Lands they'll need a map tuh git out again."

"Any trouble?"

"A mite," acknowledged Sandy, his grin broadening. "The boys shore hated tuh leave all thet good beef f'r some ignorant rustler tuh pick up. You take yore trick?"

"Cleaned the board," smiled Lefty. His segundo's grin was infectious.

Limpy set a pot of coffee on a shelf beside the lanky rider and gathered tin cups off their hooks as the trail-stained crew jingled in.

For once the cook was silent as the intruders lounged around his sacred kitchen, sipping hot coffee and rehashing their experiences on the long night ride. Again and again, his sunken eyes wandered towards Lefty, standing silent and preoccupied back against the wall. Thought of sudden death still chilled the marrow of Limpy's bones.

Sandy yawned, pitched his empty cup in the sink; he hadn't closed his eyes for twenty-four hours. "Wal," he declared, "me f'r a mite of shuteye. Reckon the Boxed R'll be too busy scratchin' f'r its cows tuh trouble us f'r awhile. Cummon, boys, le's loose the ponies and hit the hay."

To Limpy's visible relief, Lefty moved out of the shack with the bunch of riders. Alone, the crabbed-featured cook hobbled hastily to his disordered bunk in the corner. He hauled a war bag from beneath the bed and fumbled inside, laid a Colt .45 on the floor and set a broken box of cartridges beside it. With fingers that still trembled, he broke the gun, slipped five shells into the cylinder, lifted up his apron and stuck the weapon beneath his waistband. Then he returned to the neglected flapjack batter.

The exhilaration of action behind him, a black mood of depression settled upon Lefty's usually buoyant spirits. Torn by conflicting impulses, he perched gloomily

on the top rail of the corral, watching Sandy and his pards strip the saddlery from their ponies and finally fade into the bunkhouse. The lanky rider had been primed to kill in the cookhouse. Now he battled an urge to go back and finish the job. But the edge of his anger was blunted. Somehow, a curious sympathy for the crippled cook crept into his mind. How many such wrecks had Lobo left behind in his drive for conquest? Anyway, he couldn't kill in cold blood.

Perversely angered at his own softness, he wandered over to the house, plumped down on a chair in the empty kitchen. He was sitting there, deep in thought, when Alice bustled in. She jerked to a stop at sight of his unshaven, clouded features.

"My!" she ejaculated. "You're the very spit of Paw!"

"Yeah!" Lefty's tired face twisted in a humorless grin. "That's no reason why I should act like him."

"What's wrong, Lefty—you sick?" There was quick concern in her voice.

"Yep," he retorted roughly. "Sick of this blasted spread and everything about it. Sick of double-crossin' and killin'. Plenty good men'll taste lead to hold the iron—and right now I feel it jest isn't worth it."

The girl watched him with puzzled eyes. "You've changed—plenty," she observed quietly. "Not long back your ideas were very different. Did the Circle L eat dirt last night?"

"Nope, we stamped a passel of Triple S stuff into Buckeye and hazed a bunch of Boxed R critters to hell-and-gone."

"Well, you should be cheering, not glooming around like a bear with a sore head."

"It's not that that riles me." His blue eyes came up and bored angrily into hers. "It's the double-crossin'. George and Porky have thrown in with the Triple S, and you—you sold us out, too."

"I—I what?" she demanded helplessly.

"Sold us out." Lefty plunged recklessly ahead. "Didn't you ride out, two nights back, and meet up with thet desert rat—name of Dan? He hates the guts of the Lingrens. Can't say I blame you, at that; Lobo fried your paw and maw."

"So that's what you think of me!" Alice's voice was restrained, but the quick rise and fall of her bosom betrayed the emotion that surged within.

"I saw you," replied Lefty tonelessly.

Face blanched, lips compressed, the girl stood watching him. "Guilty as hell," thought the rider. He dragged to his feet. "Reckon I'll drift."

"I think you better," she returned tensely.

"For keeps," continued Lefty, barging towards the door. "You got plenty men now to hold the spread, if you wanta hold it. Me, I wish I never saw the Circle L. So long!" He raised his arm in a weary gesture of farewell.

"Lefty!"

He turned reluctantly. There were tears in her eyes.

"Aw, cut the sob stuff," he grated. "And fire Limpy—he killed Paw."

The cook's cleaver jangled the breakfast call as Lefty scuffed across the yard. Punchers hurried out of the bunkhouse, late-comers passing up the basins on the wash bench. Lefty entered. Sandy's crew were still snoring. Silently, he gathered up his soogans, rolled and roped them in the half-dark. Then he shouldered the roll and toted it towards the corral. He caught up the claybank and tied the bedroll behind the cantle. While a girl watched through a blur of tears from behind the kitchen curtains, he hit leather and rode into the valley, bearing westward, towards Thunder Pass.

In the sheriff's tin-roofed office at Indian Wells a spare, wizened figure glared defiantly at the placid features of Jim Waters. Chairs tilted against the wall, the burly Hippo and swarthy Dakota watched silently.

"Who give you the right tuh chowse me in heah?" shrilled Dan, the desert rat, sharp eyes darting around at the poker faces of the three lawmen. "Whar's yuhr warrant?"

"Now don't git riled up, old-timer," advised the sheriff patiently. "You ain't under arrest. I jest crave tuh fire a few questions—mebbe you would give us a hand."

Dan pushed back his stained Stetson, worried a chunk of chewing tobacco with yellowed teeth and eyed the sheriff warily. "Git it off yore chest," he snapped. A little grey chipmunk ran up his vest, settled upon his shoulder and looked around with bright, beady eyes.

"Wal, I'd be doggoned!" muttered Hippo. He stretched out a heavy hand. "Hello, little feller!" The chipmunk showed its tiny white teeth, scolded shrilly.

"Lay off Blinky, mister!" warned the prospector. "He's got a temper like a tarantula."

"You was around Indian Wells the night afore Lobo Lingren was bushwhacked," questioned the sheriff.

Dan's jaw worked vigorously upon his chaw. "Wal?" he challenged.

"Mebbe you could tell us something about the killing?"

"Thet's yore job—I ain't no law houn'."

"Lobo was cut down two miles from his spread, in Stony Gulch," continued Waters imperturbably. "Yore trail pass thet way?"

"Mebbe."

"You pack a gun?"

"Sharps—and she's a lapaloozer!"

"Line the sights on Lobo?"

"Say, mister," exploded the prospector. "Ef yuh figger tuh put the finger on me f'r thet killin', yore as crazy as a coot. I ain't no bushwhacker."

"Yuh didn't cotton tuh Lobo," came back the sheriff's flat, inexorable voice.

"Hated his guts!" returned Dan promptly.

"And plugged him!" The accusation shot from the sheriff's lips. His voice was flint-edged now. "Quit sunfishin'!"

Dan bridled beneath the sheriff's accusing stare. His head swiveled to meet the deputies' blank faces. For the first time fear shadowed his restless eyes. "It's a danged lie," he shrilled. "He was daid—" His voice checked suddenly, died in his throat. Uneasily, his feet shuffled. He swallowed, aghast at the admission.

"Go ahaid!" The sheriff commanded pitilessly.

"I ain't got nuthin' tuh say," mumbled Dan sullenly. "You git a feller all chowsed up."

"Lissen!" Waters leaned back in his swivel chair, eyes focused upon the desert rat's eroded features. "Lemme tell you what happened. You and yore burro hit f'r the Apaches the night afore Lobo was beefed. You spread yore blankets somewhere's west of town. At sunup you hit west. Yore trail led through Stony Gulch. You heard a hawse ahead and beat it up the slope. Lobo rode down the gulch. You threw down on him from behind a patch of brush. Then you dropped down f'r a look-see, and hightailed west. Ain't thet the straight?" He leaned forward, grey eyes boring into the desert rat's fidgeting figure.

"You got it wrong, Sheriff." All the belligerence had seeped out of Dan's wizened face now. "I hit the ridge, not the trail. Then I hears a shot, down below. I dropped down. There was Lobo, sprawled acrost the trail. 'Good riddance,' sez I. But I didn't crave tuh git tangled in no

killin', so I beat it—pronto. Thet's Gawd's truth, I swear it!"

The sheriff's hand rasped across his jaw. Dakota snorted.

"How come yuh didn't hit f'r town and report the killin'?" queried Waters.

"Like I said—I wanted out."

"You'll hev a mighty tough job convincing a jury."

Dan's jaw worked on his chaw; he was regaining confidence now. "I kin prove I'm in the clear tuh any jury in Eagle Valley."

"How?"

A cagy grin stole over the prospector's features. "I ain't talkin', mister. Stick me in the cooler ef yuh want, but yuh don't loosen old Dan's yawp."

The sheriff shrugged indifferently. "You'll loosen up, when the time comes. Right now, yuh kin drift." He swung around to his desk.

Dan glared defiantly at the deputies and walked stiff-legged out of the office, the chipmunk chittering on his shoulder.

As he emerged, two spurred riders jingled past—rotund Porky Pawson and ponderous George Lingren. Porky's shrewd eyes, ever alert, swept over the prospector's shabby figure. Still glowering, Dan met the pudgy foreman's eyes with a challenging stare, but the pair drifted past, oblivious to his hostility.

Back in the office, the suspect's departure loosed Dakota's tongue in swift query. "How come yuh didn't jug the galoot?" he demanded. "Didn't he as good as confess?"

The sheriff shook his head slowly as he built a smoke. "Whar's the motive? Takes a mighty powerful motive tuh kill. Mebbe Dan's on the up and up. The old gopher's record is clean. Would you want tuh be found with a stiff?"

"The sign shows he beat it—pronto," boomed Hippo. "And he bellied down in the brush."

"Shore, tuh git a bead on Lobo!" shot in Dakota.

"Mebbe he was scairt," put in the sheriff. "Plenty jaspers would circle Lobo."

"It still don't set right," grumbled the deputy.

Waters smiled. "You go scratch f'r motive, Dakota. Yore mebbe on the right track. Dan knows more'n he spilled."

Shadows shortened as the sun circled high. Indian Wells sank drowsily into its midday siesta. Dakota, still itching with dissatisfaction over Dan's release, roamed aimlessly beneath the wooden canopy of the plankwalk. Hippo levered his thick legs across Dakota's vacated seat and commenced to snore. The sheriff carefully opened out *The Stockbreeders' Gazette*, slid down in his swivel chair, spread the outstretched paper over his face to discourage the flies, and dozed.

Dakota drifted into the Silver Spur, nodded to Porky Pawson, George Lingren and a knot of Triple S riders at the bar, ordered a bottle of beer and stretched his legs beneath a table.

Outside, the sun-swept street was deserted save for Triple S ponies at the rail. Dan and his patient burro trudged past, the dust spiraling behind them. A cur hung around the doorway of the U. S. Restaurant. Swarming flies droned an accompaniment to the rumble of men's voices at the bar.

The deputy moistened his tonsils and set the lukewarm bottle on the table, eyeing the peaceful scene with jaundiced eyes. Nothing much ever happened in Indian Wells, he reflected, slapping irritably at a persistent horsefly, and when they did get a first-class murder Jim Waters tangled his spurs. About all a smart deputy could do around here was jug drunks—just to give the

sheriff the satisfaction of booting them out of the cooler the next morning. A plumb waste of effort!

Dispiritedly, Dakota raised the bottle again . . . A shot cracked across the quiet like a whip lash. Hoarse yells up street shattered the brooding quiet. A shotgun boomed heavily.

The deputy dropped his bottle as though it was red-hot. In two bounds he was through the batwings and out on the street.

He saw a square-jawed, tall rider dart out of the Valley Bank, a leather money sack swinging from one hand, a smoking gun gripped in the other. As the rider ducked into the alleyway beside the bank, the shotgun roared again and the glass panels of the swinging bank doors were shattered into tinkling fragments.

The bank robber's features were plain in the bright sunlight as he disappeared down the alley at a clumsy run.

Grabbing the butt of his six-gun, the deputy spurted towards the bank, a hundred paces distant. Behind him, Triple S waddies spilled out of the saloon. From all directions, shirt-sleeved citizens, toting shotguns and rifles, streamed into the street.

Dakota was the first to reach the alley. It was empty save for overflowing garbage cans. The swift tattoo of a fast-moving pony's hoofs hit his ears. He cast around quickly for a mount.

Then the sheriff loped up, Hippo puffing at his heels.

"Bank histed," barked Dakota. "I seed the jasper—plain."

"Place him?"

"Shore—it was Lefty Lingren. He jest beat it; his pony was tied in back."

Chapter 11

BROKEN glass crunched beneath the sheriff's boots as he moved towards the bank doors. "Hightail down tuh the livery and saddle up, Dakota," he threw over his shoulder. "You, Hippo, tote the Winchesters from the office. Rattle yore hocks!"

He pushed through the swinging doors, with their ragged remnants of glass panels, into the bank. Facing him, a smooth counter ran across the premises. At one end it was hinged. The other end was glass-partitioned and formed a desk for the teller. In the rear, the huge steel door of the safe stood out blue-black against the white-painted wall. A small private office had been built to the right of the entrance. Its open door was labeled "President."

But the sheriff's eyes had no time for these familiar details. Light from the high, narrow windows fell upon a white-maned figure in black business suit, collapsed upon the polished floor by the hinged wicket. Right arm hanging limp, the frosty-eyed bank president, Jacob Eisler, propped his sagging body with the left. Blood dripped steadily from the white fingers of his dangling right arm and pooled on the smooth varnish of the floor. A shotgun lay across his legs.

Eisler was slightly built, wiry, thin-lipped. And he was mad, right through. "Go get that killer," he yelled. "I can wait."

"Shore, Jake," returned the sheriff soothingly. He moved towards the injured man with long strides. Eisler

winced as he gently fingered the bloody arm. "Bone busted," he reported. "Gimme the lowdown—pronto."

Numbness from the shock of the slug's impact was wearing off now and the banker's high forehead was sweated with pain. He groaned, deep in his throat. Waters dropped down beside him on one knee, supporting his body. Eisler was an old man; likely he would faint. "Easy, Jake," the sheriff cautioned. "Kin yuh talk?"

"If it kills me!" gritted the white-lipped banker. "Harry, the teller, had left to eat. I took over. This man came in. Tall, lanky, blue eyes, dressed like a puncher. He threw down on me. I ducked, sprang towards the shotgun beneath the counter. He fired. The impact of the bullet knocked me down, half-stunned me. He jumped over the counter, began to scoop notes and gold from the cash drawer into a coin sack. I dragged myself to the shotgun. Tried to aim it with my left hand. It exploded prematurely. He laughed—laughed, mark you! —leapt over the counter with the sack and ran for the street. I crawled to the gate and fired again—too late!" The banker's teeth gritted with mingled pain and wrath. "The gall of the crook! In broad daylight—without a mask!"

The shot-pitted doors bulged inward before the press of a crowd of excited townsmen and punchers.

"Button up!" rapped Waters, as they surged in yammering, "and, f'r gosh sakes, don't stomp around like a herd of steers." Hippo's bulky form blocked the doorway behind them.

"Hey, Hippo!" The burly deputy stolidly thrust through the buzzing throng. "You take over. Send f'r the doc and hustle these jaspers outside. Then watch the bank 'til Harry gits back."

The deputy nodded. He swung round massively. "Hey, you, Tod Hawkins, light a shuck f'r Doc Cald-

well! Everyone outside, gents!" Ponderously and adamantly he started to herd protesting spectators toward the doors.

Waters pushed outside, fending off eager questioners. Dakota sat his pony in the street, holding the sheriff's saddled sorrel.

Waters ducked beneath the rail and swung into leather. He wheeled up street, the swarthy deputy cantering beside him.

"You plumb shore thet yegg was Lefty Lingren?" he questioned.

"Stake my saddle on the varmint," returned Dakota promptly.

"Wal, I guess we'll hit f'r the Circle L. The hairpin musta been loco, figgerin' he could git away with this."

The two hit the adobes on the edge of town and Waters reined down to a jog trot. They bore west, following a curving wagon trail, towards the blue hills.

"Anyone hit?" inquired the deputy.

"Jake's winged—busted arm—but full of vinegar." Waters' head turned towards his stocky aide. "You say Lefty toted an iron in one paw and a money sack in the other?"

"Lamped him plain as I see you."

"Which hand grabbed the gun?"

Dakota's mahogany forehead creased. "The right," he returned presently.

"Kin yuh swear tuh thet?"

"Positive!"

"Lefty's a southpaw, shoots from the hip," returned Waters laconically.

"Which ain't sayin' he don't pack two guns."

"Nope," admitted the sheriff slowly, "but you'll brand us a pair of jackasses ef you read the sign wrong."

"Which I didn't," shot back the deputy confidently.

Waters grunted and lapsed into silence. The deputy

had eyes like a hawk, and the wounded banker had identified the robber as a tall, thin, blue-eyed puncher. Sure looked like Lefty had been on the rampage.

The Circle L was thick with lounging punchers when the two lawmen rode in. Alice had not yet broken the news of their boss's abrupt departure and the crew idled around awaiting orders.

At sight of the sheriff's badge, glinting upon his grey shirt, a sudden tenseness gripped the men scattered around the yard and outbuildings. The relations of at least two-thirds of the riders on the Circle L payroll with the law were delicate—so delicate that the sheriff's placid gaze, seemingly blank but actually missing nothing, marked several punchers sliding hastily into the bunkhouse and others fading discreetly into the dim depths of the big barn.

In tight silence men watched Waters step down outside the house. Alice opened the door. If she was surprised she gave no indications of the fact.

The sheriff's grey eyes ran over her trim form approvingly. Too many ranch women went to seed before the deadly combination of heat, isolation and monotonous routine. But this neatly dressed, brown-eyed girl with carefully plaited hair was not one of them.

"Lefty around, ma'am?" he inquired politely.

She hesitated, uncomfortably aware of the sheriff's direct gaze. "No," she replied finally. "He left the ranch, early this morning."

"Alone?"

Again premonition of trouble seized her. She nodded.

"Didn't ride in again?"

"No," she said quietly. "He won't be back—ever. He rode for the Rio Grande—at least I believe that's where he came from. Why do you want him?"

Waters ignored her question. "You say he left early; when would thet be?"

"Sunup."

The sheriff rasped the stubble on his chin. "I figgered Lefty took over the Circle L. He change his ideas?"

Alice smiled wryly. "Yes—he hates the Valley, and perhaps he can't be blamed. I think I know how he feels. He's too—big—to be another Lobo."

"So!" Waters considered this. "Wal"—he kneed his sorrel—"reckon we'll drift."

"Hell, ain't I glad tuh git shut of thet hangout!" exploded Dakota, as the pair rode out on to the flats. "I was figgerin' which one I should git afore they got me. Lay there was a dozen hombres jest itchin' tuh draw."

"Not countin' the jasper heftin' a Winchester in the blacksmith shop," grunted Waters. "Whar in creation did Lefty round up thet bunch of hawse thieves?"

"Reckon I read his brand right," came back the deputy smugly.

"Yep, 'pears he's an outlaw," acknowledged the sheriff. "Guess he fixed tuh collect afore he shucked the dust of Eagle Valley. Wal, we may drop a rope on the jasper yet. Ef he hit south, ain't no water between Thunder Spring and Bitter Wells. Chances are he'll lay over at the Spring; doubt ef his hawse could make it tuh the Wells."

Before the dust of the lawmen's departure settled, Sandy straightened from where he had hunkered in the shade of the bunkhouse, hat well over his eyes. He crossed to the house and rapped on the kitchen door. Again Alice opened up.

"Trouble, ma'am?" inquired the freckled rider politely.

"I don't know," she confessed. "The sheriff wanted Lefty."

"Mebbe the Boxed R and Triple S been squawkin'."

Alice shook her head, eyes clouded. "I—I just feel it's something worse. Lefty's gone, you know."

Sandy frowned perplexity. "Don't git yuh, ma'am," he said slowly.

"He's gone back to the Border."

"F'r keeps?"

She nodded, sadly. "I'm afraid so."

"But why in heck would he pull out?" expostulated the gangling segundo. "We done set the Boxed R and Triple S back on their heels. Everything was hunky dory."

The girl smiled, her eyes pensive. "He's gone and—and I don't think we'll fight any more. Will you tell the men I have money in the house to pay off anyone who wants to quit?"

Slack-jawed, the freckled rider digested her amazing statement. At length he regained his voice. "Yore throwin' away a mighty fine spread, ma'am. When Lefevre's wolves and the Triple S git through, yuh won't hev a garden patch left. Then they's the Lazy J a-bustin' tuh move in."

For the first time something akin to anger sparked in the girl's steady eyes. "Can't you men think of anything but cows and range?" she flashed. "This mighty fine spread, as you call it, is soaked with brutality and blood. What a legacy Lobo left—a heritage of hate! I'd far sooner work as a—a waitress in town than own the Circle L, if more blood is to be spilled to hold it together. I'd—" She stopped abruptly. "Oh, what's the use of trying to explain? You're a man—you wouldn't understand."

"No, ma'am," admitted Sandy. "Wal, guess I'll go git the boys t'gether." He hesitated, fiddling with his belt buckle. "Shore sorry Lefty pulled out—he was all wool and a yard wide."

"I'll say he was," she agreed softly.

An hour later, a body of bleak-faced riders, Sandy at their head, streamed out of the spread and were swal-

lowed in the labyrinth of the western hills. A hard-featured hombre, with iron-grey mustache, spurred up beside the leader. "Wal, Sandy," he drawled, "guess the bunch splits again. 'Pears like we jest warn't cut out tuh be cow nurses."

"Split up!" The freckled rider chuckled. "Seems like you and me had a hand in hightailin' a might sweet slice of Boxed R beef inter the Bad Lands not long since. I'm headin' f'r them critters right now, Nevada. Lanky Lefevre don't know it, but he's trading cows f'r Circle L range."

Other punchers, in twos and threes, dribbled away from the Circle L, heading for Indian Wells. The spread was through, so why stick around? Finally, the bunkhouse was empty, the ranch deserted, save for Limpy growling in the cook shack and Alice packing her clothes in the fort-like ranch house.

Southward, two horsemen jogged untiringly towards the deep notch in the Apaches that marked Thunder Pass. The grassy foothills had long been left behind, fading into blue heat haze. Wreathed in shimmering dust fog, the pair crawled through a parched, rock-ribbed land, a land of canyon and cactus, eroded butte and spiked yucca. A dead land where nothing moved, save the mountains quivering through currents of heated air.

The hours slid by and still the tireless ponies bored ahead. The sun dipped towards the rugged Apaches, a mighty barrier flung across their flank, its frowning peaks thrusting high into the blue. Slanting heat waves scorched through the riders' sweat-stained shirts; the alkali dust prickled their skin, caked upon their dry lips and burned their slitted eyes. Endlessly, they wound through tortuous defiles, crossed glaring alkali flats, stirred the debris of centuries around the flanks of mighty mesas.

Relaxed in their saddles, uncommunicative as two mummies, the two lawmen crept relentlessly along the trail of Lefty Lingren—two specks in a vast vista of gloomy grandeur.

The lofty peaks dissolved in shadow, purple-mantled the rock-gashed ridges, bars of glowing crimson faded against the darkening sky.

Dakota coughed hoarsely, ran his tongue over dry lips. "Should hit the Spring afore long," he croaked.

The sheriff merely jerked his head.

Night closed in. Stars pin-pricked the darkening canopy overhead. Blurred against the gloom, the two riders rounded the shoulder of a ridge. Ahead, a tiny spark glowed bright against the grey.

Dakota straightened stiffly, pulled his six-gun, dusted it off with a crumpled blue bandanna and twirled the cylinder.

"Circle!" grunted Waters.

Dakota pulled away. The sheriff checked his sorrel and watched his deputy fade into the night. Absently, he made a smoke, remembered and hastily stuck the paper-covered cylinder behind his right ear. Then he kneed the sorrel into motion and drifted towards the tiny flicker.

Lefty hunkered over his fire. Behind him, water seeped steadily out of a crevice in the cliff base and splattered monotonously into a rockbound basin. The click of the grazing claybank's jaws was plain in the brooding silence as the animal cropped upon the few patches of sun-dried grass.

The lean rider was thinking hard as he stared into the crackling flames, and the scowl set upon his square features told that his thoughts were not pleasant.

Now that he had made the break, memory of the Circle L would not be downed. He could almost feel Lobo's

presence in the silent immensity, and the licking blue flames reflected the scorn in the old man's flinty eyes. Whatever his faults, Paw was no quitter. He had stuck it out, battling to the bitter end. And what a bunch of fuzzy-tails he had foaled, mused Lefty. George, good for nothing but soaking up snakewater; Conrad, long since lost on the outlaw trail; himself a yellow quitter. He even lacked the guts to plug his paw's killer. And what of the spread now, with a timid girl to rod it?

The rider stirred restlessly, tortured by his thoughts; thoughts that had stung like wasps throughout the long, lonely day. If it had not been for the indecision they aroused, he would have crossed Thunder Pass and dipped down into the desert country beyond long before sundown. As it was, shaken by doubt, he had unsaddled at the Spring. Once beyond the Pass he knew he would never return.

A faint, unfamiliar sound from the night brought the brooding rider's head up ever so slightly. Still staring at the fire, he concentrated upon listening. It might be a prowling wolf or mountain lion out there—or a more dangerous two-footed animal, man.

The claybank had quit cropping.

Again Lefty heard it, through the continuous drop, drip, drip of the spring—plain and unmistakable, the click of an ironshod hoof on rock.

Like an unleashed spring he sprang to his feet. Crouched, left hand poised above the butt of his swiveled gun, he shuffled back out of the circle of firelight.

A rider materialized out of the night. Lefty's ready hand dropped to the gun butt . . . "Hist 'em!" rasped a sharp voice behind him. The hard muzzle of a gun pressed hard into the small of his back.

Reluctantly, his hands rose shoulder high.

"I got the coyote dead tuh rights!" Dakota's voice grated in his ears.

The sheriff swung down from the saddle, picked a burning twig from the fire and touched it to his cigarette. "Wal, Lefty," he commented evenly, "yuh rode f'r quite a spell, but yuh didn't ride far enough."

"What's it to you?" asked the wiry rider.

Waters shrugged. "Nothin', 'cept I want yuh f'r bank robbery, with violence."

Chapter 12

LEFTY blinked stupidly at the sheriff. "Bank robbery!" he repeated. "You're loco!"

"Search him, Dakota!" said Waters imperturbably.

The lanky rider wheeled angrily as the deputy's hands, from behind, slid swiftly over his body.

"Quit the shenanigans!" Sucking his cigarette on the opposite side of the fire, the sheriff touched the butt of his long-barreled Colt significantly. "Thet is," he added amicably, "ef yuh crave tuh travel in the saddle and not across it."

Dakota's probing fingers found the bulky money belt. He unbuckled it, yanked it clear and tossed it across to Waters.

The sheriff hefted the broad belt, heavy with gold. "Now take a look-see at his saddlebags. Ef he didn't hist the bank he shore had a big payday."

"I toted that dinero up from the Rio Grande," protested Lefty. His perplexity had passed, succeeded by smoldering anger. Looked like this was a put-up job. And he'd figured Waters was on the square!

"Shore!" agreed the sheriff, buckling the belt around

his own lean waist. "You saved it outa yore wages of thirty dollars and found. Anything in the saddlebags, Dakota?"

"Nope," declared the deputy, stuffing a spare shirt, a box of cartridges and oddments of saddlery back into place.

"Guess he cached the currency. Wal, we found plenty." Waters pulled out a pair of handcuffs, stepped forward and quickly snapped one steel bracelet upon Lefty's left wrist and the other upon Dakota's right. "We'll stretch out 'til sunup, then hit f'r town."

They locked Lefty in the hoosegow. His bewilderment increased when first Dakota, then Jacob Eisler, his arm strapped to his chest, and finally a Mexican woodcutter who had chanced to be leading his loaded burro down Main Street at the time of the holdup, identified him as the man who had held up the Valley Bank. Baffled and sullen, Lefty gloomed in the solitude of his cell. It was plain he was behind the bars for keeps. With such a weight of evidence against him, conviction was inevitable when the circuit judge arrived at the county seat. No longer wasting his breath upon angry denials, he paced his narrow cell through the long days and puzzled over the perversities of fate. Thought of escape burned in his mind, but the county jail was no flimsy bird cage. The steel bars of his cell were file-proof and the tough adobe walls two feet thick. Hippo, the jailer, was careful to leave his gun behind when he brought the prisoner's meals. As for visitors, Lefty had never seen a soul save the identifying witnesses on the first day of his incarceration.

His only link with the outside world was a little square window high above his head on the adobe wall. By the hour he would lie on the straw mattress of his bunk and stare at the small square of blue sky. It was unbarred, wide open—and twelve inches across!

One morning there was a break in the routine. The burly deputy ushered in Alice, nodded towards Lefty in the corner cell and plunked his massive form down upon a stool in the passage—to wait and watch—guns had been passed to prisoners before.

Pain in her eyes, the girl advanced and stood close to the bars, peering through. Lefty listlessly gathered himself from the bunk and drifted towards her, his blue eyes dulled with hopelessness.

"Why did you do it, Lefty?" she asked softly. "I would have given you all the money you needed."

"I didn't!" His voice was flat with weariness. "I was toting dinero aplenty. Guess the gang around town was out to frame me—and they did a sweet job!"

"But Mr. Eisler, the banker, swears you shot him, and he wouldn't lie," she demurred. "Other men saw you run out of the bank."

"They kin swear 'til hell freezes over!" The sag came out of Lefty's shoulders and a trace of the old belligerence sharpened his voice. "I jest wasn't around. When I pulled out of the ranch I hit south; was camped at Thunder Spring when that slick sheriff rode in on me."

"You wouldn't lie—to me?" she asked earnestly.

He read the appeal in her troubled eyes and his mouth twisted with wan humor. "Cross my heart and hope to die, Al!"

It was a pledge from their school days, from years long past when, pigtails flying, Alice rode the hills with the three Lingren boys; a pledge which, to their youthful minds, was more solemn than any oath sworn upon a stack of Bibles.

"Then we must get you out of this horrible place," she replied indignantly.

"You got no more chance of prying me outa this joint than scratchin' your ear with your elbow," grinned Lefty. After days of depression, he felt his spirits rising

—here at last was one person who believed in him. "I've been kickin' like a bay steer, but I might jest as well have hammered an anvil with my fist."

"But you can't be punished for another's crime; it's a terrible miscarriage of justice," declared the girl.

"Innocent men have danced on air," he returned dryly. "Wal, the ranch hunky dory?"

"I really don't know. Mr. Pawson's running it. I'm a —a waitress in the hotel dining room."

"Porky! Thought he sided the Triple S. And you don't hev to sling hash. There's plenty beef kin be shipped from the Circle L," he declared hotly.

Alice smiled. "Now listen, Lefty. Judge McFarlane appointed Mr. Pawson to take over the ranch until Paw's affairs are wound up. He will tally the stock and ship everything ready for market. Whatever is left will be auctioned. The Judge offered to advance money to me, but I prefer to support myself. When everything is turned into cash, I intend to divide the proceeds equally with you and George."

"How come Porky was elected?"

"He was Paw's foreman and he is the most suitable man the Judge could find."

"It doesn't set right," grumbled Lefty, "and I'm not touchin' a dollar."

Alice smiled. "You get more like Paw every day—as obstinate as a mule and as headstrong as a spoilt child." She thrust her small capable hand between the bars. "Keep your spirits up, Lefty! If you're innocent, we'll get you out. I'm so glad to see you again!"

The prisoner's stubby fingers closed upon hers, held them tightly, released them reluctantly. "So long, Al!" he muttered. "You look like a heart flush to me. Guess I had you figgered wrong."

That night Lefty had too much upon his mind to sleep. He lay upon his bunk and watched the stars

patched high above his head, digesting the news Alice had brought.

So Porky was running the Circle L! Might just as well hand it over to Lanky Lefevre or Jed Thorburn. Porky had sold the spread out once and he'd sell it out again. It was a safe bet the Boxed R, Triple S and Lazy J were tearing it apart faster than a pack of coyotes would pull a dead steer to pieces. And he was behind the bars, bogged down to his neck! What a dish they'd served him in Eagle Valley! He squirmed off the bunk, wandered around the dark cell like a tortured animal. "Damn the whole flea-infested, cow-hocked gang!" he ejaculated fervently.

"I'm applaudin' them sentiments!" drawled a voice.

The startled Lefty swung around, eyes searching the gloom of the cells on either side. He could have sworn the jail was empty, except for himself. Then he saw that a head blocked the little square window above him.

"Sandy! You danged old wart hawg!" ejaculated the prisoner joyously. "You framin' to climb to the Pearly Gates?"

"Closest I'll ever git, unless I locate a longer ladder," chuckled the freckled rider. "Why didn't yuh give me the lowdown on histin' the bank?" he reproved. "I coulda tolled the lawmen away. Now look what it got yuh!"

"I didn't brace the doggoned bank," growled Lefty wrathfully.

"Shore not!" soothed the other. "You was jest ridin' by and thet buzzard-beaked banker pitched out a sack of dinero. Say, they's a barrel of lard roddin' the Circle L, what there is left of it. Carries his right wing in a sling."

"Porky Pawson," supplied Lefty. "Paw's old segundo, slick as a hawg. Reckon he come a cropper on our trip wire at Buckeye."

"Slick!" mocked Sandy. "The jasper's crooked as a

rattlesnake with a pain in his belly—trailing Circle L cows regular over the county line tuh his Circle U spread west of the Apaches."

"I figgered as much," groaned the prisoner.

"And he's handin' Circle L range, free f'r nuthin', tuh the Boxed R, Triple S and Lazy J. Claims he ain't got the men, nor the right tuh holt it, seein' it's Government range."

"You got a gun?" exploded the prisoner, squirming below.

"Feel plumb nakid ef I warn't heeled," admitted Sandy.

"Drop it! And meet me behind the livery barn, with a horse, after sundown tomorrow. I'm outa here!"

"Ketch!" drawled the rustler. A dark object circled through the square window above. Lefty caught the .45 and thrilled to the feel of the cold steel.

The day dragged more heavily than a wagon without wheels. Jail routine never varied. Lefty needed no clock to check the passing of the hours—at eight A. M., Hippo brought his breakfast; shortly after noon the sun burst through his window; at six o'clock the last ray died high on the bars of his cell, at seven his supper arrived.

The gun tucked between his folded blankets, he leaned against his bunk and steeled himself to wait out the limping hours. Slowly, the line of bright light that flamed through the window slid up the bars. When, at last, the sun dropped behind the bulk of the Courthouse, the bar shrank imperceptibly, until finally it was no more than a thin white line. For the twentieth time, the tall prisoner yanked his watch out of a pants pocket—its hands were weighted, too! Seemed like the whole world was slowing to a halt.

The cell greyed. He groped for the gun and pushed it inside his shirt, the barrel beneath his belt. The steel galled his bare flesh, but there was no other place upon

his person to conceal it. Just one more hour and that big bull of a deputy would tote in his supper. One hour! He drew a deep breath and eased the gun sideways—the foresight bit into his belly. . . .

A key rattled in the outer door. The bolt rasped grittily as it shot back. Hippo trudged ponderously along the passageway, carrying a tray from the U. S. Restaurant. He glanced disinterestedly at the prisoner, seemingly relaxed, half-asleep, against the bunk, balanced the tray upon a beefy hand and inserted a key in the lock of the cell door.

Lefty straightened negligently as the deputy stepped inside and extended the tray towards him. The prisoner's left hand dipped inside his open shirt front, jerked out, gripping the .45. Before the slow-thinking Hippo fully grasped what had occurred, the gun was aligned upon his belt buckle.

"One squawk and I'll plug you," promised Lefty softly. "Set the chuck on the bunk!"

He side-stepped, swung around, covering the deputy. Moving backwards, he fumbled with his free hand, found the door, stepped outside and slammed it behind him. It locked automatically.

Hippo philosophically placed the tray on the bunk, wheezed down beside it, and poured himself a mug of coffee. He'd rodded the law long enough to know a fellow can't argue with a gun, particularly when a fast gunman is behind it.

The key ring looped upon his fingers, Lefty moved briskly down the passageway, closed the outer door, and emerged upon the open lot behind the Courthouse. Oncoming night shadowed the scene. Yellow lamplight glowed in the little windows of the sheriff's shack.

Lefty stepped briskly towards the shack, checking an impulse to run. The door gaped open, revealing its

emptiness. His head swiveled warily as he walked, but the rear of the Courthouse was deserted.

He gained the doorway, glanced around. Winchesters were racked in a corner. His gunbelt, and another, hung from pegs. He threw the keys on the desk, lifted down his gunbelt and buckled it on with a feeling of vast relief. His eyes ran over the three slide drawers at the side of the sheriff's desk. One by one he yanked them open, searching for his moneybelt, in vain. With a grimace of disgust, he shot the third drawer back into place and turned to the door.

A muffled bellowing came from the adobe jail now. Lefty hesitated, glanced towards the street. A citizen or two, dim in the dying daylight, straggled past, but no one as much as turned his head—the yelling of drunks in the hoosegow was a familiar sound.

The escaped prisoner slid down the side of the Courthouse, drew a deep breath and stepped out on the shadowed plankwalk. Two punchers jingled past without a glance. Lefty drifted down street towards the livery, breathing more easily now. There was little chance of recognition unless he was unlucky enough to plump up against the sheriff or his mahogany-faced deputy. And that would be just his luck, thought the rider wryly.

"Hey!" A tall figure, features hidden beneath the wide brim of his Stetson, oozed out of an alleyway.

Lefty jumped around like a cat, hand streaking to his gun butt.

"No fair!" drawled Sandy. "I ain't heeled."

Lefty relaxed. "Hell, I figgered it was the sheriff. Horses ready?"

Sandy gestured towards the hitch rail behind him. "A-rarin' tuh go!"

Lefty quickly ducked beneath the rail, loosed the reins of the claybank and swung into the saddle. Stirrup to stirrup, they jogged down street. The tall rider

was still uneasy; memories of dreary days in the bare cell still hung heavy. This taste of freedom seemed too sweet to be lasting. Besides, who knew what prying eyes watched him from beneath the canopies of the plank-walks on either side? Waters or the eagle-eyed Dakota would recognize the rangy claybank at a glance.

"Weren't you takin' long chances, tyin' the horses on Main Street?" he queried, eyes darting nervously to left and right. He itched to spur his pony into a gallop.

Sandy's shoulders lifted. "Mebbe, but the sheriff and thet gimlet-eyed deputy are outa town—a bunch of hawses was run off the Terrapin, ten miles north. And I left a bottle with the liveryman—gamble he's drunk. Then, they's half a dozen of my boys driftin' around, primed f'r trouble. We came tuh town hell-bound to spring yuh, boss."

Lefty's heart warmed. And his paw had strung up such men as these!

The freckled puncher's lazy tones again drawled through the dark. "Beating it f'r the Border?"

"Nope, I'm sticking around," came back Lefty. "You held your boys t'gether?"

"All yuh kin use, I reckon."

"We kin use 'em," replied the wiry rider curtly, "but I haven't got coin enough to buy a drink."

"We'll take it out in beef—the Circle L excepted," returned the rustler gravely.

"You'll take it in coin, plenty coin, when we've finished the job," said Lefty emphatically. "From now on my play's to harry hell outa the coyotes who are swiping chunks of the Circle L."

Chapter 13

DRY, dusty and disgusted, Sheriff Waters and his deputy urged their leg-weary ponies southward over the stage road that snaked down the length of Eagle Valley. Dry from long hours exposed to the burning sun; dusty from trailing a herd of Terrapin saddle stock for endless miles across the purpled prairie; disgusted because they finally found the missing horseflesh peacefully grazing in a meadow near the headquarters of Sandy Creek. The disgust was aroused by a shrewd suspicion that what had been reported by red-eyed Pat Halloran as a slick rustling job bore all the earmarks of a plant—to toll them out of town.

Why? That was the question which troubled Waters as he frowned at the distant lights of the cow town, prickling faintly far across the swales.

Finally, the two clip-clopped between the square-fronted stores that lined the widening of the road that was Main Street. The town was wreathed in darkness, save in the vicinity of the Silver Spur. Here light pooled upon the plankwalk and conviviality cascaded through the batwings.

Dakota ran his tongue over dry lips and shot a sideways glance at the sheriff's erect figure. "Town's quieter'n boothill. A snort would slide down slicker'n a greased hawg," he suggested hopefully.

"Too danged quiet," grunted Waters. "We kin licker up later. Right now I crave tuh chin with Hippo."

They drifted past the saloon and wheeled towards

the frowning façade of the Courthouse. Waters strode into the deserted office. The bracketed oil lamp was smoking, had blackened its glass chimney. Dakota, shuffling at the sheriff's heels, glanced idly around, then snapped to quick attention. "Lefty's gunbelt!" he barked.

The sheriff's gaze leapt to the empty peg. "I sniffed trouble ten miles back," he growled. "Gimme them keys!"

"So Lefty ain't workin' alone," murmured Waters, when Hippo told his story. "And his pards handled us like a team of blind mules. Slips Lefty a gun. Run off a bunch of Pat's hawses tuh toll Dakota and me outa town, then they deliver the jasper as neat as a mail package, all tied up. Wal, the hairpin beat it and yuh cain't gather up the water after the bucket's kicked over. Le's licker!"

The three lawmen adjourned to the Silver Spur and gathered around a bottle at one of the liquor-stained tables. The bar was thick with punchers.

"Never figgered I'd see the day when a Circle L segundo would buy drinks f'r Boxed R and Triple S saddle pounders," commented Dakota.

The sheriff's glance ran along the crowded bar. Boxed R, Triple S, Circle L, Lazy J, all were amicably rubbing elbows and whisky was flowing freely. Porky Pawson, fat features wreathed with the inevitable grin, waddled over and set an unopened bottle on the lawmen's table. "On the house, gents!" he explained affably. His right hand was bandaged and slung in a bandanna knotted around his neck.

"Is this a bribe or a celebration?" inquired Waters gravely.

"Mebbe he's drummin' up trade," suggested Hippo.

Porky's jowls quivered with amusement. "Nope,

we're celebratin' peace in Eagle Valley. The hatchet is buried. Range grabbin', gents, is a thing of the past."

"No more range left tuh grab?" inquired the sheriff innocently.

"No more Lobos tuh grab it," returned the paunchy foreman significantly.

"Sez you," grunted Waters. "Me, I know different. Wal, heah's another dove a-flappin' its white wings!"

Lanky Lefevre's tall form broke out of the press at the bar. He loped across the sanded floor and stood staring down at the three lawmen with cold eyes. "This is a right good night f'r a necktie party," he grated. "Lefty Lingren and a bunch of his hooters run off a passel of Boxed R steers. I make a motion we wind up the party by stringin' up the bustard."

Waters sipped his drink, leaned back and blandly met the acrid foreman's challenging stare.

"Yeah," he drawled, "and whar was them steers?"

"Grazing around Willow Spring."

"Last I heard Willow Spring was Circle L water."

"The spring's on open range," blustered Lefevre. "Rustling's rustlin'."

"Kin yuh locate Lefty?"

"Quit funnin', sheriff!" chuckled Porky. "Reckon it ain't more'n two whoops and a holler tuh the hoosegow."

"But Lefty ain't in the hoosegow," returned the sheriff blandly. "Right now he's on the loose."

Porky's grin froze upon his chubby features and Lefevre glared incredulously. The sheriff's pronouncement had reached the ears of other punchers at the bar. Men sifted over, to surround the lawmen's table.

"What was thet about Lefty Lingren?" demanded a Triple S rider.

"He done busted outa the cooler," returned Waters laconically.

Silence draped the saloon as the import of his words seeped down the long bar. Then voices gradually began to drone again, but they were muted, their boisterousness was gone.

Dakota bent a sardonic eye upon the sheriff's lean features. "You plumb ruint the party," he accused.

It was soon apparent that the swarthy deputy had hit the bull's-eye. News that the hard-hitting scion of Lobo Lingren was loose, and liable to go on the rampage again, effectually damped the high spirits of Porky and his cohorts. Lefevre gathered his crew and hit for the batwings. Porky followed with a knot of Circle L punchers. In ten minutes the bar was deserted, except for Jake, the proprietor, swabbing the wet mahogany.

Waters sauntered over and set Porky's unopened bottle on the bar. Then he returned to his seat, spread his long legs and poured another two fingers of his own special brand. "Wal, I guess we kin hear ourselves think now," he chuckled. "I gamble every spread around the Circle L has a full crew ridin' range t'night."

"Seems tuh me," came back Dakota sarcastically, "we orter git busy. Seein' thet Hippo heah handed over the keys and kissed the jasper good-bye, it's up to us tuh corral him."

"I never argy with a hoglaig," declared the burly deputy. "No siree, it ain't healthy."

"Thet's hawse sense," agreed Waters. "A stiff cain't rod the law. Now, I was figgerin' on bracin' thet desert rat agen. His mine's located foot of Black Butte, flanking the Apaches. Odds are Lefty headed f'r the Bad Lands—seems he's tangled with a gang of brand blotchers. You and me, Dakota, might hit west at sunup. You kin keep cases on the hoosegow, Hippo, and," he added dryly, "f'r gosh sakes don't let anyone pack it off. Took me most of ten years tuh persuade the county tuh build thet jail."

When the rising sun rimmed the horizon, the two lawmen were riding westward across the plain. Rattlesnake grass rustled beneath their ponies' hoofs. Purple clusters of tall bee plants, yellow evening star and golden pea painted the flats with color.

Neither the sheriff nor his swarthy deputy were given to wasting words on the trail. For an hour they jogged towards the majestic Apaches in silence, their lengthened shadows dancing far ahead.

Browned by the sun, the foothills drew close, with companies of white-speared yucca marching across their flanks, interspersed with impenetrable clumps of yellow-crowned prickly pear.

Dakota spoke for the first time. "Acquainted with Dan's claim?"

"Yep, it's the old Esmeralda mine. Dutch mining company took plenty ore out back in the forties. Then the vein petered out. Some Limeys took over and the Pawnees wiped them out. It lay f'r years 'til Dan took tuh gopherin' around. Packs his ore tuh Hardtack f'r smelting."

"The old coot pick up the vein?"

Waters shrugged. "He's been there nigh ten years and never asked f'r a grub stake."

The shadows of the plodding horsemen shortened as the sun crept up and the heat grew more oppressive. The rounded, smooth-flowing hills began to break up. Outcropping rock gashed the ground. The riders wound through narrow canyons, the steep slopes of which were clothed with white pine and fir. A narrow creek cascaded down beside the trail.

Waters drew rein in the shade of a cottonwood close by the creek, swung out of leather, loosened his cinches and rocked the saddle. His deputy followed suit. While the ponies drank, the two rolled smokes and hunkered against the grassy bank.

Again they hit the saddle, ever beating westward. . . . Their shadows began to lengthen behind them. The timber thinned and the terrain assumed a greyish hue, mottled with red sandstone, occasionally relieved by bright green chaparral. Grass had disappeared. Great mesas bulked dim ahead, to be in turn dwarfed by the tawny bulk of the Apaches rising behind them. Stunted cedar and piñon clung to the rock-littered slopes. It was a thirsty, lusterless land of gloomy ravines and twisting canyons, barren ridges and saw-toothed hills. The sheriff nodded towards a square knob, thrust like a clenched fist above the chaos of canyons ahead.

"Black Butte!" he ejaculated.

The deputy jerked his head. "Shore like tuh run a dragnet through these gosh-durned Bad Lands," he commented.

"Yuh'd land a mess of funny fish," agreed the sheriff.

The shadow of the Butte reached towards them.

"Dan's around!" volunteered Dakota suddenly. "They's a burro feedin' way tuh the left."

Grey and crumbling, mine buildings materialized against the rugged background of the butte—a long, low bunkhouse, roof pitted with yawning holes; a great mill, towering like a specter, with spidery hoist; a two-story warehouse. All touched with the dead hand of disintegration. Behind, like a pyramid, rose a great heap of tailings.

The two lawmen threaded through the debris of disused lumber and rusting machinery heaped around the decaying buildings. It was evident that despoilers had reached even this isolated spot.

Waters drew rein before a small shack, obviously built from salvaged material. A water pipe ran to its door and a riot of wild flowers bloomed in a boxed-in garden patch.

The sheriff rapped at the closed door. Dark eyes rest-

less, the deputy stepped up beside him. Dakota's strain of Indian blood made his perceptions unusually acute. "I kin smell death!" he grated.

Waters kicked the door open and stepped over the threshold. A black swarm of flies rose from an object on the earth floor. The sheriff bent, mouth twisted with distaste, and eyed the remains of Desert Dan. The desert rat's head had been practically blown to pieces. Shotgun blast, surmised the sheriff—no bullet could have done that damage. From the rear, too. Some hombre had just stepped up and let him have it. Looked like the body had lain there three, four days.

"Le's git outa this stink!" he grunted.

Side by side, the two lawmen hunkered against the front of the shack, glad to get away from the stench inside.

The sheriff fished the makin's from a pocket of his dangling vest. "We drop in on Dan tuh clean up one killin' and we git another on our hands," he observed somberly. "Don't it beat hell?" Dakota grunted. The sheriff fashioned his smoke and lit it. "Question is," he continued, "was Dan beefed tuh close his yawp, or is it jest robbery, plain and simple."

"Plenty renegades in the Bad Lands," supplied Dakota. "Mebbe Dan had a stake."

"Yep, they's jaspers around who'd murder a feller f'r his boots. Reckon we'll hev tuh plant the poor stiff; then we kin give the dump the once over."

Dakota snaked the mortal remains of Desert Dan to the yawning mouth of the mine shaft and toppled the body down. "He kin guard his gold," explained the deputy, noting the disapproval in Waters' eyes. Then they examined the shack. There wasn't much to examine, just one small room with a crude bunk set at one end. A rough table, two boxes that served as chairs, a small circular stove, a shelf laden with cans, eating utensils,

shaving material. Half a sack of flour in one corner, a gunny sack stuffed with clothing in another.

By the gunny sack a faded blue shirt, shredded into strips, lay on the floor. It was blotched with blood. The deputy dove beneath the table and held up a small, shriveled grey body. "Thar's his doggoned pet; killer twisted its neck!"

The sheriff grunted; he was busily hunting for sign of pick or shovel on the hard-packed floor. If Dan had a stake, it was probably in the form of ingot gold, and most miners bury their valuables. He noted soot, thinly powdered, behind the stove—the pipe had been recently detached. He worked the pipe off the lip on top of the stove and swung the stove sideways. A neat square hole gaped black where it had stood. Dropping to the floor, Waters plunged his arm down, fingered the bottom—and brought out a soiled gunny sack.

"Cleaned out!" ejaculated Dakota, an interested spectator.

"Seems thet way," agreed the sheriff, regaining his feet. "Reckon it's robbery." He grasped the stove to replace it.

"Hold yore hawses!" exclaimed the deputy. He picked up the body of the chipmunk and dropped it in.

"You git the damndest ideas!" growled Waters, as he levered the stove back into place.

"We kin send out the heller," explained Dakota.

It was night when the pair loosed their gaunted ponies in the livery corral. Dakota made a beeline for the Silver Spur. The sheriff headed for his office.

Hippo, his bulk swamping the swivel chair and his legs cradled on the much-abused desk, was snoring so loudly that Waters could have sworn that the walls were rattling.

The sheriff fished a coin from his pocket, slammed it on the deputy's hairy chest and snapped, "Stretch!"

Hippo blinked uncertainly, then slowly raised his big arms. "Okay, pard," he murmured drowsily, "I never argy with a gun." Then he glimpsed the sheriff's tight smile. "Thet's a lousy, sheepherdin' trick," he declared indignantly, knuckling his eyes. "I mighta had a weak ticker and died of shock."

"I doubt ef you'd be missed," returned Waters dryly. "Any news of Lefty?"

Hippo rose and stretched. "A mouthful," he yawned. "Bill Senale, marshal of Hardtack, come hellin' inter town soon after you left; been hangin' around most all day. Lefty done histed the Miners' Bank. Jest drifted in, casual like, threw down on the cashier and a customer and gathered up a stack of dinero. It was so easy, he jest laughed like hell."

"Bill git him?"

"Nope. He raised a posse but they lost the galoot in the Bad Lands."

Chapter 14

IN the canyon country, beyond the headwaters of Buckeye Creek's rough terrain, thick with timber and chopped by twisting gulches, a bunch of saddle ponies were tied beneath knotty piñons in a narrow gorge. The cliff wall, ribbed with crumbling shale and splotched with sandstone, frowned high above the piñons. At its base, the cliff curved inward, leaving a cavernlike corridor, screened by tangled masses of chokeberry and buckberry.

Dim even in the glare of noonday, the uneven floor

of the hide-out was lumped with rolled soogans. A fire glowed dull red and the forms of riders were silhouetted black as they moved around it.

On a ledge above the bouldery mouth of the gorge, a lookout lay prone, unimpressed by the panorama of cliff and canyon outspread before him.

This was the hide-away of Sandy's rustlers. The freckled rider hunkered against a piñon while he explained to an absorbed Lefty the layout at the Circle L.

"Porky done made a deal with the owners thereabouts." Sandy idly pitched a pebble at a squawking jay. "All legal and aboveboard—'you grab the range but gimme the stock,' which suited them jest right, seein' as they're law-abiding citizens and not thievin' rustlers —like yours truly.

"They comb Circle L stuff outa the hills and deliver tuh Porky. He trails a herd most every week tuh the loading pens at Wildcat, end of steel, f'r shipment tuh the stockyards. Proceeds, I reckon, go tuh Lobo's estate. Guess thet's what the hombre's paid tuh do. But he trails another herd, mostly young stuff, towards Ute Pass. This side of the Pass, the crew holds 'em in a box canyon and works over the brands." Sandy picked up a twig, traced a circle and an L in the dirt. Then added another upright to the L, making U. "Git it? Thet bladder of lard bought out a run-down spread and registered the Circle U brand in the next county. He's doin' right well—one f'r you and one f'r me!" The freckled rider laughed derisively.

"Now my idea," he continued, "is tuh grab the next Circle U herd. He hires a pack of greasers; reckon he figgers he'd hev tuh cut white men in. It would be jest like takin' candy from a kid!"

"So he's stocking his doggoned Circle U with Circle

L beef!" Lefty's brows knitted with thought. "Can you locate the spread?" he inquired abruptly.

"Nope; it's somewhar's west of the Apaches. We could dog the next herd."

"Keeno! Have two good men hit the trail—and lay off the rough stuff. I wouldn't upset the wagon for a million—not yet! We can handle Porky later. Right now I'm declarin' war on the range hawgs. Lissen!"

The freckled rider grinned delightedly when he finished. "Doggone it, Lefty," he chortled, "yore shore in a sod-pawin', horn-tossin' mood!"

"Me!" returned the rider slowly. "I come into Eagle Valley as ignorant as a newborn calf, and they climb my hump. I ride out peaceful, and they knock my ears down. From now on I'm clawin' like a ring-tailed bobcat."

Like the pendulum of a clock, a glowing speck of scarlet moved back and forth on the shrouded gallery of the Lazy J ranch house. Jed Thorburn's heavy-set figure, once rawhide tough, now grown bulkier and softer with advancing years, swayed the rocker as he chewed upon a stogie.

It was late, far into the graveyard shift. Across the yard the bunkhouse held sleeping men. Not a sound broke the peace of the starlit night, save the steady creak—creak—creak of the ancient rocker. But the old cowman was uneasy, "f'r no reason at all," he told himself angrily. The very silence of the night telegraphed a brittle warning. The sudden shrill chirp of a circling bat prickled his back hairs "f'r no reason at all."

The rocker moved faster under the impetus of Thorburn's restlessness. That doggoned Lingren cub was at the back of it—reminded him of Lobo, who figured with the cunning of a coyote; slashed with the ferocity of a wolf; fought with the blind tenacity of a bear. There

was only one thing you could figure about Lobo—he'd do something you never figured on. And now his cub was loose in the hills, and liable to strike.

Sure—the cigar glowed more brightly—he'd busted out of the Indian Wells cooler two days back and dropped out of sight complete. Porky claimed he'd beat it for the Border. But Porky was new to the Valley. He didn't know Lobo. The old man hadn't crowded his boundaries for thirty years. And he didn't know the Lingrens.

That damned Lefty had bred true to type. He slashed the Triple S and the Boxed R. And hadn't he as good as promised he'd claw the Lazy J if it didn't ride wide of Circle L range?

Wal, the Lazy J had grabbed a thick slice of the Circle L. . . . The old man stirred uneasily. Damn that bat! Most of his crew were way off westward right now, riding herd on Lazy J beef, which was fattening on Lobo's grass.

And Lefty was due to strike! He could just feel it in his bones!

Impatiently, Jed Thorburn tossed his butt over the gallery rail. As if the glowing arc of its fall was a signal, the peace of the Lazy J was shattered by a shrill yippee from the corral. Snorting and startled, the saddle stock swept around, manes tossing and heels flying.

Jed heaved to his feet, big hand seeking the butt of his six-gun. His bull voice boomed across the yard, arousing the skeleton crew.

Still yelling, the cowman clumped down the gallery steps. He glimpsed mounted figures through the swirling dust of the corral, loosed a shot. It drew no more than a derisive yell. Then the drumming of hoofs lessened, died. With an oath, Jed realized that the fence had been breached and the cavvy herd was fast disap-

pearing into distance. Where in tarnation were those lazy punchers?

The bunkhouse door flung open and sleepy-eyed waddies stumbled out into the gloom of the yard, buckling on belts, pulling on pants, staring around uncertainly.

Winchesters spat viciously from the night. Lead whipped across the yard in venomous cross-fire. A puncher dropped in a squirming heap, screaming at the kiss of death. Another went down as a slug clipped his leg, and squirmed for shelter.

The four surviving Lazy J punchers surged back into the bunkhouse. Jed Thorburn, regaining the agility of his lost youth, had already spurted for the gallery and lay stretched among the litter on the floor, emptying his Colt at crimson flashes that winked incessantly from the night.

Toting Winchesters, three of the Lazy J waddies ducked out of the bunkhouse and darted into the shadows, seeking points of vantage from which to reply to the raiders' fire. The fourth jerked up short on the threshold, quietly collapsed and lay in a muddled heap.

A strange white halo tinged the sky above the towering bulk of the horse barn—Jed's pride. Flattened on the gallery, head slowly swiveling upon his bull neck as he strove fruitlessly to pick up a mark, the cowman bent puzzled eyes upon the phenomenon. The light grew stronger; smoke bit his nostrils. A bitter oath choked in Jed's throat.—The barn was afire!

Oblivious to bullets and the grim warning of the two dead men, he struggled erect and plunged towards his beloved barn. The fire was taking hold now—timbers crackled; tongues of flame licked hungrily at the sun-dried siding. Spark-laden, a column of smoke mushroomed high above.

Searing heat drove the cowman back. So concerned was he with the calamity, Jed had not noticed—or cared

—that the rifle fire of the unseen assailants had ceased. His three surviving punchers emerged from cover.

"Git a water line on the big tank!" roared Jed. "Mebbe we kin save it."

A waddy dashed to the water tower, stilted high beside the windmill—and found himself sloshing in mud and water. He turned the valve—and water dripped sluggishly. He raced back. "The bustards done emptied it, Jed!"

Dawn threw cold, revealing light upon charred timbers and smoking ashes. In the bunkhouse a man writhed, his leg roughly splinted. Three haggard-faced punchers packed the bodies of their two pards behind the blacksmith shop.

Jed Thorburn eyed the empty corral, the gutted barn and the wrecked tank. Yep, Lefty was on the loose!

Heavy shoulders sagging, he moved ponderously towards the house. The ponies would straggle home, the barn could be rebulit, the tank could be fixed—but the Lobo's cub would slash again.

Light was strong now. Jed mounted the gallery with heavy feet, turned from habit towards his rocker—and shrank back as though a rattler was coiled upon it. Set against the back of the chair was a sheet of paper. Upon it was crudely inscribed, with a sooty finger tip: REMEMBER ME?

A waddy passed, toting pick and shovel. He paused. "Want we should gather the boys, boss?"

The Lazy J boss turned. He felt old, too old to tingle to the zest of battle, too old to feud.

"Yep," he rumbled wearily. "Grab the fust pony yuh kin git a rope on and carry word—I want every steer offen Circle L range, pronto."

Swaying upon its broad leather springs, the Wildcat stage jolted along Main Street. Bewhiskered Cheyenne Charlie, the driver, swung the leaders over. Brake blocks squealed and the yellow Concord groaned to a stop outside the Western House.

Kate Rogers, dark eyes sparkling with ill-suppressed excitement, jerked upon the door and jumped out before the wheels stopped rolling. Bonnet dancing, she ran across the dusty street toward the sheriff's office.

Jim Waters was seated at his desk, laboriously inscribing items in a dog-eared expense book, when she burst in like a cyclone, bonnet awry. Dakota, half-dozing in a straight-backed chair, almost swallowed his smoke.

"I saw him!" she cried triumphantly.

"Yeah!" drawled the sheriff, dropping his pen with relief.

"Walking around Wildcat as large as life—the crook!"

"Jest who did yuh see, ma'am?" inquired Waters curiously.

"Why, Lefty Lingren, of course!"

The sheriff pulled a chair forward. "Set down, ma'am, and spill the story."

Kate Rogers sat on the edge of the chair, set her bonnet straight, patted her coppery hair back into place, then drew a deep breath. "I took the stage into Wildcat to meet the train. A school friend was visiting me, but she was taken sick. Well, I was riding out again in the stage this morning and looking through the window, when who should I see but Lefty Lingren, just stepping out of a saloon. He's just the type to be drinking at that hour!" She paused, breathless, then continued. "I almost jumped out, but that would have warned him. So I waited until the stage reached Indian Wells. And you should arrest that disagreeable old mosey-horn of a driver. I implored him to hurry, but he said he drives the

stage on schedule and wouldn't sweat his team for any female on earth."

Waters smiled patiently. He knew the impetuous Kate—and the taciturn Cheyenne. "You plumb certain it was Lefty?"

"I'd stake my life upon it."

"He lamp yuh?"

"Oh, no! He didn't even glance at the stage. He was probably drunk."

"You spill this tuh anyone—Cheyenne, f'r instance?"

"That old mule would be the last person I would confide in," declared Kate vigorously. "I haven't mentioned it to a soul, except you."

"You showed good sense, ma'am," approved the sheriff. "Now button up! You spill the beans and he'll slip away like a shadder. We'll go git the hairpin."

Kate rose, her red lips tight-pressed. "I hope you catch him, and hang him, for a horse thief and a rustler," she flared.

"Button up!" reminded Waters dryly.

For a moment she stared at his weathered features. anger stirring in her eyes. Just what did the lean-faced sheriff mean by that crack? Then she flounced out.

The sheriff swung to the sharp-eyed Dakota, wide awake now.

"Git it?"

"The gal hates Lefty's guts."

"Fergit thet! They's three banks in Concha County—Indian Wells, Hardtack and Wildcat. Lefty histed two, which leaves one—Wildcat. Lefty's stickin' around Wildcat casing the joint. They's another holdup due! You hightail f'r Wildcat. Ride in after sundown. Cover the bank from now on, and keep under cover yoreself. Git Tom Sharon, the marshal, tuh work with yuh." Waters' voice brittled. "Lefty's raisin' hell around the Valley. Git him!"

"Dead or alive?"

"How would you handle a mad dawg?"

"Fill the bustard full of buckshot," returned the deputy carelessly.

The sheriff shrugged. "Yore the doctor. Git goin'!"

Chapter 15

TENSION gripped Eagle Valley. The import of the raid upon Jed Thorburn's Lazy J spread was plain—Lefty was on the warpath, determined to battle his father's old antagonists to a showdown—and he was proving as ruthless a fighter as Lobo himself.

His jail break took the Triple S, Boxed R and Lazy J by surprise. Caught them with their pants down, as Sandy put it. With his arrest, they had flooded beef onto Circle L range, each eager to pre-empt as large a slice of the pie as possible—and possession was nine points of the law where free range was concerned. The tenth point was holding it—but Lobo's ancient enemies anticipated no trouble on that score. The orders of Porky Pawson, ramrod of the Circle L by court edict, were to sell off Circle L stock. Porky, and the court, were not interested in government range.

As a result, the crews of the invading spreads were spread from here to hell-and-gone. Home ranches were deserted—the owners were too busy pushing their waddies farther afield to consolidate their gains.

Lefty's night raid on the Lazy J hit them like a tornado. Jed, the kingpin, turned about face and had his

crew riding night and day, desperately chowsing Lazy J stock back across Circle L boundaries.

Irate, hatchet-faced Colonel Soothby of the Triple S, a tough old ex-cavalryman, and saturnine Lanky Lefevre of the Boxed R were loath to relinquish the rich prize, but with the grim example of the Lazy J in mind, hastily pulled the bulk of their men in to guard the home spreads from Lefty's vengeance. Their cows were left scattered and practically unguarded, strewn across Circle L range. And Sandy's rustlers reaped a bountiful harvest!

Day after day, wounded men rode in from the thin network of punchers left to watch the widespread herds, to report hopeless fracases with hard-riding brand blotchers who swarmed in from the Bad Lands. Slugs fast whittled down the scanty screen of guards, while cows were spirited away in bunches. Meanwhile, the raging cowmen were compelled to hold the bulk of their crews in idleness at home. Who knew if they rode out to protect their herds, but that Lefty and his gang might slash again—and they would return to smoke and ashes?

Such was the situation when Dakota rode north to Wildcat and the sheriff reluctantly reopened his account book and prepared to continue figuring. But it seemed he was fated never to bring that expense account up to date. Spurs jingled outside and Lanky Lefevre stalked into the office, tailed by the mustached Colonel Soothby.

"Nice day, gents!" greeted Waters amicably.

Lefevre growled and flung into a chair. The peppery Colonel snorted.

The sheriff swung round to face his visitors.

"See heah, Waters!" gritted the Colonel. "You've gotta do something about thet infernal jailbird. The bustard's raiding our herds night and day. By day, mind

you! Those damned rustlers hev taken over the range."

"Yore boys—crippled?" inquired Waters gently.

"Crippled! Hell, hawg-tied!" rasped Lefevre. "We gotta keep 'em home tuh guard our buildings. Reckon you know Lefty smoked up Jed."

"And yore elected tuh rod the law, sir!" shot in Soothby irately, "not tuh polish yore pants in town and allow this Border scum tuh terrorize the Valley."

The sheriff scratched his lean jaw. "Rod the law, eh, Colonel? What law gives you the right tuh ride across Circle L boundaries and grab choice range?"

"The law of King Colt, sir! Open range belongs tuh the man who can take it—and hold it."

"Then I reckon Lefty's within the law."

The quick-tempered Colonel reddened as he perceived the weakness of his position. "Thievin' rustlers are outside the law," he snapped.

"And thar's a warrant out f'r Lefty Lingren—it's yore job tuh serve it," threw in the Boxed R foreman.

The sheriff slowly rolled a smoke as he eyed the two angry cowmen.

"Gents," he replied evenly, "I never butt inter fights between spreads. I been told aplenty by Eagle Valley cowmen tuh keep my snout outer their personal dogfights. You done grabbed a bull by the tail, figgering it was a prime steer. Clear Circle L range of yore cows and I'll tend tuh rustlers. But, f'r gosh sakes, don't come bleatin' tuh me when yuh pick up a branding iron at the wrong end and burn yore pothooks. Lefty's my meat—I'll git him."

"If we git him, he'll swing higher than a kite—the blasted rustler!" promised Lefevre.

"It's the custom of the range tuh string up rustlers," agreed Waters blandly. "Wal, gents, I got some paper work tuh do."

Wildcat, thirty miles north of the county seat, was little more than a handful of shacks splattered around the end of steel.

Below the little red depot, a network of corrals fringed the tracks. Facing it was a row of grey, square-fronted business structures—a general store, the bank, two saloons, hotel, barber shop, pool room and—spaced apart—a livery barn.

Trail herds from the Valley and beyond were the life-blood of Wildcat. The town stirred drowsily when the daily Limited rolled in; sat up and took notice with the arrival of each trail herd and its free-spending crew—and promptly dropped back into profound slumber with their departure.

If steel had been pushed on to Indian Wells—a disquieting possibility—the town would have quietly turned up its toes and died.

The bank was a homespun affair, handling a vastly larger amount of business than its appearance would suggest. It was quartered in a one-room converted store, wedged between the hotel and a saloon. A counter spanned the rectangular room. Behind the counter a massive safe was set to one side on the dark-stained plank floor. In the rear of the safe a head-high partition blocked off the back of the room, which served as a cloakroom and catch-all.

Behind the partition, the swarthy Dakota, in socks, squatted upon a box and yawned in the semi-darkness. For forty-eight hours he had not moved out of that stuffy storeroom. His blankets were spread in a corner, riding boots beside them. A shotgun, ready-cocked, was propped beside a door that opened on to the office. For the twentieth time the deputy's hand strayed towards the makin's in his vest pocket—and dropped away. Lefty was as crafty as a coyote, a whiff of smoke and he'd guess a lookout was posted behind the wooden wall.

Two days on the job, ruminated Dakota, and still no sign of the tall holdup man. Mebbe he'd scented trouble and vamoosed. It was a sure thing he'd not been tipped off. The deputy had ridden into Bill Alvoyd's little bungalow half a mile from town, after dark, told the manager-cashier his story, tied his pony in the barn and slipped into the bank after midnight.

Since, Alvoyd had packed in a package of food and two bottles of beer each morning when he opened up. Even Tod Sharon, the town marshal, didn't know he was around. But still—no holdup. Dakota was beginning to yearn for a lungful of fresh air, and there were plenty rats in that storeroom.

The bell on the street door jingled—another customer! Dakota lazily straightened—the routine was getting monotonous—padded to a tiny peephole bored in the partition . . . and choked back a gasp of amazement. It was Lefty Lingren in person!

Square features creased in a friendly grin, the lean rider sauntered up to the counter. Alvoyd nodded, slipped off his stool and stood with his hands on the counter.

Lefty gazed casually around at the bare, white-painted walls. Dakota shrank back as his blue eyes swept past the peephole. "Kin yuh cash a pay check?" he drawled.

"Anything up to a million," smiled the cashier.

The rider reached casually towards his pants pocket. Right hand, noted the wide-eyed deputy. Then, in a split second, his demeanor changed.

"Stretch, mister!" he grated. "Or yore worm feed." His right arm blurred up. A gun arced and leveled at the amazed cashier.

Alvoyd backed away from the corner, arms raised, moving crabwise to give the concealed deputy behind him a clear field of fire.

Still holding his gun on Alvoyd, the bandit slid across

the smooth counter. With his free hand he jerked a rolled gunny sack from beneath his waistband, tossed it towards the cashier.

"Fill 'er up, pard!" he grunted, waving the gun at the cash drawer.

Back in the storeroom, tightly gripping the shotgun, Dakota stood tiptoe, tensed as a steel spring, watching the play . . . and inwardly cursing his thoughtlessness in failing to bore a hole in the partition big enough to take a gun barrel. As Alvoyd stepped back, his muscles set for a leap towards the door.

Menaced by the rider's gun, the cashier moved forward, bent and picked up the gunny sack from the floor.

Dakota groaned inwardly with chagrin. Now he couldn't blast Lefty without making hash of Alvoyd. And if a customer came in, he would be in the line of fire, too.

Helpless, he watched the cashier stuff gold and currency into the sack. Finally, the drawer was emptied. Alvoyd held the weighty sack towards the bandit, who grabbed the booty with his left hand, leisurely swung a leg on the counter, rolled his body and brought the other leg up beside it. For a moment his broad back was turned towards the fuming deputy.

Dakota jumped for the door. "Duck!" he yelled, as he booted it open. Alvoyd dropped. Sprawled awkwardly across the broad counter, the bandit twisted, glimpsed the charging deputy. His six-gun roared . . . the bullet splintered through the partition. Then Dakota gave him both barrels. The front windows tinkled into fragments as the scattergun thundered. The deputy dropped the empty gun and darted forward through the acrid smoke-haze, jerking out his Colt. Not that he expected trouble—a blind man couldn't miss with shotgun shells.

At the counter, he jerked to a stop and stared at the bloody mess of flesh and bone slumped across it. Ashen-

faced, Alvoyd raised from the floor and stood beside him. The cashier shuddered. "My God, what a mess!"

"You step inter a double charge from a ten-guage scattergun at ten paces," grunted Dakota, "and yore day's work is done." He pulled the gunny sack from the crooked fingers still fastened around its neck. "Heah's yore dinero!"

The roar of gunfire shocked Wildcat into wakefulness. A gaunt individual charged through the doorway, his chin wet with clinging lather. Inscribed "Town Marshal," a star was pinned to his galluses. Treading upon his heels were a white-aproned barber, waving a razor; two punchers and a barkeep with a sawed-off shotgun.

"Howdy, Tod!" greeted the deputy. "It's all over but the shoutin'. Jest blasted a holdup."

The marshal slowly holstered his gun, eyed the smashed windows and blood dripping counter with its grisly, pellet-ripped burden.

"You shoulda slit the bustard's gizzard, jest tuh make certain," he growled in disgust. "When yuh hand in thet star, try butcherin'."

"Wal, he's daid—all same Wildcat," retorted the deputy complacently.

Waters and his deputy jingled across the lobby of the Western House and stepped through a doorway in the rear into the hotel dining room. It was past suppertime and the room was empty except for Alice Branford, in neat white apron, clearing away dirty dishes, and a rancher and his family in a corner.

The two lawmen set their hats on a shelf by the entrance and sat down at a side table. Alice tripped forward with a smile. "We don't see you very often, Sheriff."

"We're celebratin'," returned Waters, watching her closely. "Lefty's daid!"

"Dead!" The girl's eyes dilated with horror; silverware spilled to the floor from her nerveless fingers.

"When?" she whispered.

"Histin' the Wildcat Bank at noon."

She drew a deep sigh of relief, bent and gathered up the cutlery scattered around her feet. "Not Lefty!" she replied firmly.

"I downed the hairpin—with a shotgun," cut in Dakota.

Alice smiled. "I received a message from Lefty not an hour ago—he's in the Bad Lands."

"Thet's what you think!" spluttered the deputy.

She nodded confidently. The color was returning to her cheeks now.

"He's daid!" reiterated Dakota flatly. "Ain't no man could live after what he stopped."

Alice smiled tantalizingly. "No!" she replied firmly.

"Who carries yore messages, ma'am?" inquired the sheriff politely.

The girl hesitated. "Well, it's a secret, but Mr. Footner, the barber, has a loft of carrier pigeons. I wheedle him into allowing me to take one into the hills occasionally. I pass it to Lefty. He wraps his message around its leg and releases it. It always flies straight home. Mr. Footner is quite innocent." She tossed her head. "Lefty's no criminal, anyway."

Waters nodded. He knew Jake Footner and his pet pigeons.

Alice moved away at a call from the group at the corner of the room.

The sheriff eyed his deputy stonily. "Yore drunk or the gal's loco."

"Jim, I swear it was Lefty," averred Dakota earnestly. "Mebbe thet danged pigeon was loosed at Wildcat."

"Six hours after you claim you beefed the bustard!" Waters stared bleakly at the indignant Dakota for a full

minute, then, "I got an idea," he said abruptly. He motioned Alice back to the table.

"Kin yuh ride tuh Wildcat, pronto, ma'am?"

"Why—yes, if it's necessary."

"It's mighty important," he assured her. "Fust we eat. What's yores, Dakota?"

"I done lost my appetite," growled the deputy disconsolately. "Guess I'll go git a bracer over at The Silver Spur."

Stable lamp swinging from his hand, Tod Sharon, marshal of Wildcat, ushered two men and a girl into a lean-to in the rear of a saloon. On the ground, by the wall, a body bulged beneath a tarp. Sharon hooked the lantern on a nail, jackknifed and twitched off the tarp.

"There yuh are!" he commented shortly.

Dakota's eyes flew to the still features, and triumphantly sought the sheriff's.

Alice dropped to her knees and tenderly ran her fingers through the wavy blond hair. She rose.

"Wal?" ejaculated the sheriff.

"This is Conrad, Lefty's twin brother," she returned quietly. "The two ran away from home together. I thought Conrad was dead. He is dead now, poor fellow."

"Kin yuh swear tuh thet?"

"Yes. Conrad was thrown from his pony, racing Lefty. There's quite a dent in his head. Besides," she added proudly, "Lefty is not a bandit."

" 'Pears yore right, ma'am," acknowledged Waters. "Wal, Dakota, reckon you did yore job."

News flies across the range faster than a grass fire. The following afternoon, a girl with vindictive dark eyes galloped a sweating sorrel into Indian Wells. Her thick coppery tresses glinted in the sunlight as she stepped blithely out of leather at the Courthouse hitch

rail, and approached the sheriff's office with quick, eager steps.

Waters greeted her a trifle wearily. He had been in the saddle for the greater part of the previous night.

"Well, you got him!" she cried.

"Got who, ma'am?"

"Lefty Lingren, of course. The news is all over the Valley. Your deputy shot him to pieces, holding up the Wildcat Bank." Kate Rogers was in bubbling good humor. "I gave you the tip—when do I get my reward?"

"Ma'am," advised the sheriff soberly, "I've heard tell rumor's a lyin' jade."

"What do you mean?"

"Conrad Lingren was shot up, Lefty's twin."

"Conrad!" The word was a strangled shriek. Life seemed to flow out of the girl. Piteous with pleading, her dark eyes met the sheriff's. "You're lying," she babbled. "Tell me you're lying. It can't be. Why, I—" Her jaw slackened, she swayed, collapsed in a limp heap on the butt-littered floor.

Waters rasped his unshaven chin thoughtfully, gazing at the still figure. "Folks claimed she was sweet on Conrad Lingren," he mused, "and she turned him in. Now ain't thet one f'r the book!"

Chapter 16

Four men rode into the Lazy J. Jed Thorburn watched them impassively from the disordered gallery of his house as they piled out of leather—bleak-featured Lanky Lefevre, stormy-eyed Colonel Soothby, corpulent Porky Pawson and a ragged, saturnine rider with beady black eyes.

"Howdy, Jed!" hailed Porky, multiple chins wagging. His moonlike face creased humorously. "Cowmen's convention!"

Poker-faced, Thorburn merely grunted. Relations between the Lazy J and its neighbors had been decidedly strained since he had decided to clean his cows off Circle L range. From the rocker, he waved a thick arm negligently around the littered gallery. "Rest yore laigs, gents!" he invited guardedly.

The four jingled up the steps and picked a path through saddlery and ropes. The remaining rocker creaked ominously as Porky plunked into it. "We got Lefty whar the hair's short," he announced jovially.

"So!" returned Thorburn noncommittally.

"Yessir! Thet hawse thief is a gone goose!" The Circle L foreman jerked a pudgy thumb towards the blackened remnants of what had been the horse barn. "Reckon you won't shed no tears." His beefy shoulders shook with merriment.

The stolid Thorburn slid a stogie from a vest pocket and bit off the tip, deep-set eyes on the beaming Porky. If he was curious he gave no sign of the fact.

He spat out the chunk of tobacco. "Yeah!" The gesture and the tone of the cryptic expression plainly implied doubt of the fat man's veracity.

"Yeah!" echoed Porky, in no wise disconcerted. "You tell him, Lanky!"

"See heah, Jed!" burst out Lefevre. "This jasper," he nodded brusquely at the dusky rider, "rides with Lefty's gang. He hates Lefty's guts. Show him yore paw, Cherokee!" The rider held out his right hand, palm down. One finger was a stump, a strip of dirty linen wrapped around it. The knuckles were misshapen and the brown skin puckered in a chain of red, newly-healed scars.

"Lefty done thet," took up the Boxed R foreman. "Ruint his gun hand. Cherokee's acqainted with the hideaway of thet Lingren cub and his dog-blasted night riders. It lays west of Buckeye. He claims it's a blind canyon with a narrow neck. Half a dozen hombres could bottle up an army in there, pick 'em off like settin' hens ef they tried tuh make a break. This is our big chance, Jed!" The gimlet-eyed foreman's voice was hoarse with eagerness. "The Colonel heah throws six punchers inter the pot. The Boxed R antes eight. Porky pushes in six, which gives us twenty men. Cherokee claims Lefty rods a like number and we cain't afford tuh take chances. We need fifteen Lazy J waddies tuh bottle up the bustard and finish this Circle L fracas f'r keeps."

"And we'll be happy, sir," barked the Colonel, "to cut you in for a one-third share of the Lingren range."

Thorburn's expressionless gaze shifted from Lefevre to Soothby, then to the dusky renegade. Again he spat in slow disgust. "Yuh'd gamble on the say-so of—thet!"

"He's part Apache," reminded Porky smoothly, "and they kin hate like pison. Lookat his gun hand! What's

more, we slip five hundred cartwheels inter his jeans, so as he kin beat it." He paused, shrewd eyes dwelling on the old cowman, then added persuasively, "Yuh got a score tuh pay off. The gang's restin' up in the canyon right now."

"Biggest barn in the Valley and it went up in smoke," said Lefevre, veiled mockery in the voice.

"Folks are sayin' yore plumb scared of Lefty," chuckled Porky. "The craziest stories git around!"

Still the stolid Jed puffed silently upon his stogie. "Ever hear of a double-cross?" he rumbled, at length. "Mebbe this 'breed's tollin' you mavericks inter a bear trap."

"He leads us—under a gun," snapped Lefevre.

Again Thorburn pondered, his leathery features giving no clue to the thoughts that passed through his brain.

Then, abruptly, he made his decision. "Deal me a hand—twenty men!"

"Keeno!" beamed Porky. "When d'we ride?"

"Right now!" barked Lefevre. "Our boys are bunched at the Circle L."

That night, a cavalcade of punchers with Winchesters in their saddle boots snaked westward through the swelling hills. Ahead, rode Cherokee, Lefevre at one stirrup, Porky at the other. Behind them, Thorburn's massive body set solidly in the saddle, with Soothby's thin form at his side. At their heels, singly and in pairs, the long column jingled behind. Lobo's ancient enemies were staking everything upon this final attempt to wipe out the Lingren cub who was clawing them.

The sun sank into a sea of scarlet behind the frowning Apaches. On the narrow ledge beside the portals of the hide-away, a lookout awoke out of a doze, straightened and gingerly worked his way down a narrow path back to the canyon floor. A band of antelope skimmed past,

flew up the brushy slope that fronted the canyon entrance like white-feathered arrows. The lookout half raised his rifle at the temptation of fresh venison, remembered Lefty's strict injunction never to shoot without cause and regretfully dropped the barrel. He was too fuzzy-brained from lying out in the hot sun to wonder what had startled the antelope.

Westward, crimsoned clouds clinging to the peaks faded into deepening purple. Hoofs clattered in the narrow causeway of the canyon. In pairs, Lefty and Sandy at their head, the rustlers jogged out from between the confining cliffs upon another foray—two abreast, they were crowded close. Two, four, six riders emerged. . . . A leaden blast lashed the canyon entrance. Darting patters of gun flame ripped the grey cloak of oncoming night. Echoes of spitting Winchesters reverberated in clashing chorus through the canyons, tossed from cliff face to cliff face, ripping the slumbering peace of the dying day into ragged shreds.

To Lefty, it seemed that hell had erupted. One moment he was riding tranquilly beside the freckled Sandy through the hush of evening—the next, shells exploded like firecrackers and lead splashed like hail. Then his pony quivered before the shock of a slug and crashed down in a flurry of dust. Lefty plummeted through the air and hit the rocky trail with a shock that jarred every joint and beat the breath out of his body. Gasping for air, he lay helpless. Around him confusion whirled. Ponies tangled, hoofs lashing in mad panic, their riders stunned by the merciless onslaught. The screaming of a hard-hit horse mingled with the yells and curses of bewildered men. In swift seconds Lefty saw his riders swept out of the saddle by the scythe of death. Oblivious to the incessant whine of searching lead, he raised his head and glimpsed the encircling lines of fire, licking from the deepening gloom. With elbows and toes

he began to inch back towards the black mouth of the canyon, worming around threshing ponies and the twisted bodies of men.

From the canyon, rustler rifles bit back at the unknown attackers, but their field of fire was restricted and their enemies were bellied down behind cover. To venture outside into the deadly cross-fire was to invite death.

Foot by foot, hugging the ground, Lefty worked back. Like angered hornets, slugs flattened against the cliff wall above him; zipped into the sandy earth; ricocheted from rock.

At last the craggy ramparts of the canyon entrance loomed above him. From within, the rifles of the defenders, gaining in number now, winked red in the darkness. Pressed close to the wall, he crawled on, and on.

He reached the line of rustlers, flattened, side by side, across the narrow portal, and passed beyond them. All around were the blotched forms of men, crouched in the bottleneck, baffled and bewildered. Then he emerged into the comparative quiet of the canyon. Ponies, saddled and bridled, wandered aimlessly. Wounded men were propped against boulders. Sandy's whimsical drawl brought him to a halt. "Hey, boss, they shore made hash outa us!"

The freckled rider lay stretched on the ground. His right pants leg was ripped and a reddened bandanna was wrapped around the limb, above the knee.

"Hit hard?" ejaculated Lefty, in quick concern.

Sandy's homely features twisted wryly. "Hard enough! No bones busted, thank Gawd! A blue whistler whizzed clean through."

"We gotta get busy," Lefty's eyes swiveled around. "The bustards are liable to swamp in—listens like a doggoned army out in front. Rest easy!"

He hurried into the rockbound corridor again, gathered a handful of men and set them packing boulders from the canyon. Speedily, a rocky barricade rose across the entrance. When it was breast high—and two men gave their lives to build it—Lefty posted half a dozen marksmen behind it and pulled the remainder back into the canyon. Black night blanketed the hide-out now. Outside, the rifle fire slowly died. Quiet again enveloped the fastnesses, save for the occasional sharp crack of a gun—grim reminder that death lurked beyond the portals.

In somber silence, four wounded men were packed back into the cave and the campfire rekindled. Under Lefty's brisk supervision, clean shirts were ripped up and wounds bandaged. The cook boiled up a billy of coffee and the rustlers gathered around the fire, mugs in hand, and tersely discussed the smashing surprise attack. Lefty dispatched a party to relieve the defenders at the barricade, then hunkered beside Sandy, propped against his bedroll.

" 'Pears like we're in one heck of a jack pot," commented the freckled rider, drawing slowly on his cigarette.

"Could be worse," shrugged Lefty. "We can't get out, but they sure can't get in. We got plenty water and plenty shells. If we had plenty chuck we could hold this canyon 'til we tripped over our whiskers."

"Who in creation jumped us?"

The tall rider laughed shortly. "Who'd you think? The Boxed R and Triple S, maybe the Lazy J—Jed hasn't forgot we fired his barn."

"But how in hell did the bustards nose us out?"

"A double-cross," returned Lefty simply. "I didn't lamp Cherokee around."

"He drifted out yesterday, claimed he had tuh see a sawbones about thet paw you crippled."

"Half Apache!" murmured the rider. "Those rattlesnakes never forget! I gamble he sold us out." He rose. "Wal, I'll mosey down canyon. Mighty quiet now. Reckon them jaspers u'll play a waiting game."

At the rock wall that spanned the entrance, the lookouts reported all quiet. A dozen paces beyond the barricade, the portals of the canyon were plain, silhouetted against the flickering light of fires built out of the line of fire on either side of the entrance. It was plain the attackers were taking no chance of a sudden sortie. A pack rat could not have crept out of that canyon without becoming a plain mark in the firelight. But, reflected Lefty, it was no easier to get in than out. To rush the barricade, their assailants would be compelled to advance along the narrow, rock-walled passage which a man could almost span with outstretched arms. Four fast guns could hold the hide-away against Eagle Valley.

When day dawned there was little to indicate that forty determined punchers were holding fourteen desperate men at bay in that desolate canyon on the brink of the Bad Lands. Outside, the watch fires had smoldered into grey ash. Among the scattered boulders, three grey-shirted rustlers stared unseeingly at the brightening sky, surrounded by the rounded barrels of dead ponies. But rifles were silenced, chipmunks scampered among the slain and blue jays scolded harshly. Buzzards were circling on sluggish wings.

Beyond the rock-littered space that fronted the canyon, the terrain dipped into a wide, sandy wash fringed with gaunt cottonwood. On the farther side of the wash, a long slope, clothed with silvery greasewood, slanted up to a ridgetop. In the bed of the wash, a long line of ponies were picketed. Below the cottonwoods, spooled bedrolls were heaped. Punchers bunched around crackling breakfast fires. Niches had been hollowed along the crumbling banks of the wash from which lookouts

kept cases on the dark-shadowed crack in the cliff ahead that was the canyon entrance.

Around one of the fires the four cowmen hunkered, in great good humor. Not only had they located Lefty's hideout, but they had smashed the rustlers back into their lair without the loss of a single man. What was more, they had the gadfly of the range and his gang trapped. There was only one way he could come out—with his hands up.

Porky Pawson glanced up from a platter of beans. "Wal, did Cherokee hand us a bum steer, Jed?" he grinned.

"I guess not," rumbled the Lazy J boss.

"The 'breed craves tuh hightail, scairt tuh death of Lefty. Ef you boys'll ante up a hundred apiece, I'll take care of two hundred."

"String the sidewinder up," growled Lefevre, "f'r a thievin' rustler."

Porky chuckled. "You wouldn't go against yore word, Lanky? Five hundred was the figger, and cheap at thet."

"Pay him off and boot him out," grunted Thorburn, peeling currency off a greasy roll. "I never had any use f'r a double-crosser." Lanky dropped ten eagles into Porky's fat palm, and Soothby added his ante.

Porky pocketed the cash and currency, cleaned up another plate of beans, washed them down with coffee and waddled away. At the horse lines he loosed a pony and pulled himself heavily into the saddle. Jogging through skunkweed and boulders, he followed the curves of the wash until the camp was out of sight. Cherokee rose silently from beneath the knotted roots of a cottonwood, exposed by the eroding bank. The swarthy renegade had spread his blankets apart from the punchers.

"Got my dinero?" he grunted. "I wanna drift."

"Shore," smiled Porky benevolently. "You did a nice job, amigo, a sweet job! Le's mosey down aways!"

Cherokee led his pony from behind a clump of mesquite. Stirrup to stirrup, they walked their mounts down the winding wash, the banks high on either side.

The 'breed's beady eyes slanted towards his companion. "You kin pay me now!"

"Plenty time," returned the fat foreman smoothly. "Me, I like a pasear after breakfast; shakes up a feller's liver."

At length he reined up. With uneasy, suspicious eyes, the 'breed watched him fish a roll of bills from his vest pocket. Cherokee clutched them greedily, thumbed through the wad. His lips moved as he counted laboriously.

The Circle L foreman eyed him with a benignant smile.

The 'breed thrust the roll into a pants pocket and heeled his pony. The animal leapt forward, scattering pebbles.

Like a huge jellyfish, Porky palpitated in the saddle, watching Cherokee's receding figure. Then, as fast as a striking snake, his right hand flicked at his holster. The gun arced and thundered.

Cherokee straightened with a strangled shriek as the slug smashed between his shoulder blades. Slowly, he slumped forward, slid sideways, thudded lifeless to the ground. Reins trailing, the startled pony bolted.

Porky walked his mount up to the limp form and wheezed out of leather. With cool unconcern he rolled the warm body over with his boot, dug into the 'breed's pants pocket and retrieved the roll of bills. Then he looped his rope around the dead man's legs, mounted, took a dally around the horn and snaked the body into a patch of brush. . . . Smiling amiably, he rejoined the cowmen around the fire.

"Pay the bustard off?" inquired Lefevre.

Porky chuckled, "Thet I did!"

"Thought I heard a gunshot down the wash," commented Soothby. "Any trouble?"

The Circle L foreman's chins wobbled. "Hell, no, I kilt a skunk."

He settled his bulk by the fire again, picked up a plate and spooned a mess of beans from the pot. "Nothin' like beans tuh feed a feller's tapeworms," he remarked amiably.

Chapter 17

THE sun set and rose again, for six dragging days—and still punchers and rustlers were deadlocked. Forted up in their narrow-necked canyon, Lefty's gang could have kept ten times the number of their assailants at bay, but droning death awaited any who ventured out.

Outside, the combined forces of the Lazy J, Triple S, Boxed R and Circle L crouched like hounds around a wolf's den, awaiting the inevitable end. The days passed pleasantly enough for the watching waddies. There was ample shade along the wash and chuck aplenty. Long sessions of lacing were relieved by short spells of guard duty. And there was the pleasant knowledge that sometime the rustlers must either spill out to their death, or walk out with upraised arms. In the latter case there would be plenty ropes stretched. Porky had already picked out the trees.

Inside the canyon it was a different story. Food was

short, one pony had already been butchered. Lefty had never figured on a siege. When the attackers struck there was not two days' chuck on hand. Carefully rationed, the lean rider had stretched it over five days. Now they were down to water and horse meat. But Lefty was conscious of a danger worse than ultimate starvation. A dull blight of hopelessness had settled over the gang. Their end was plain—death. It might be ten days or ten weeks, but the shadow of the Grim Reaper lay heavy on the canyon. Hope dead, the majority of the gang became victims to leaden apathy. Now he had to use boots and fists to force the reliefs to man the barricade. Soon, he knew, he would need his gun. Then smoldering resentments would flare and it would be the end—a burst of gunfire and a free-for-all.

The hole punched through Sandy's leg healed quickly, and in a week he was hobbling around. At the end of one tension-drawn day, Lefty motioned him out of the cave where men hunkered listlessly, unwashed and unshaven, fingering the pasteboards or sucking cigarette butts, staring at nothing.

"We gotta do something," said the rider sharply. "These fish-eyed hombres, sittin' around like steers in a slaughterhouse, give me the heeby-jeebies. 'Fore long they'll jest naturally curl up and die."

The freckled rustler's features contorted mirthlessly. "Cain't blame the jaspers, boss; they kin feel the ropes around their necks right now, and it ain't pleasant. Tobacco's all gone, we livin' on hawse meat and shells ain't too plentiful. Figger we oughta parley with thet pack of coyotes outside?"

Lefty laughed shortly. "Parley! Hell, we got nuthin' to offer except our necks. We could bust out; a fistful might ride clear."

"We cain't bust out," returned Sandy dolefully. "We gotta string out. They'd pick us off like pigeons."

Pigeons! Lefty's eyes sought a box, hung from the limb of an oak. The white feathers of one of Jake Footner's carrier pigeons gleamed white through the slats.

"We could get a message out," he muttered, half to himself.

"Yeah, who to?" mocked Sandy. "Ef I know Jim Waters, he won't mix in this fracas. Rustlers is strictly cowmen's business. Nope, boss, I kin hear the harps a-strummin' right now."

That night Lefty moved up into the gloom of the walled canyon mouth. Behind the rock barricade men hunched hopelessly. The entrance was bathed in the baleful gleam of the blazing watch fires outside. From the bed of the wash came muffled shouts of roistering punchers.

The tall rider climbed over the barricade, stole forward along the base of the towering wall and dropped on to his belly as he drew near the lighted entrance. Still in the shadows, he squirmed forward. On the edge of the rim of light, he pushed his Stetson ahead until the firelight glinted upon the dusty felt. Instantly, the rim of the wash stabbed crimson from half a dozen points. Lead whee'd and whined. Splintered rock showered him. He hastily squirmed backwards, clutching his hat —the crown was ripped to rags. Sandy was right, he pondered somberly; the canyon mouth was a death trap.

No answering fusillade came from the defenders behind him. Ammunition was running low. Even if their cartridge belts were full, reflected the rider, inching back along the wall, the condemned rustlers were too low in spirit to match guns with the concealed, determined waddies.

At dawn, spurred by a stubborn refusal to admit defeat, he wandered around the canyon, seeking a spot where an active man might climb the imprisoning preci-

pices; well knowing, from previous fruitless searching, that his quest was hopeless.

The canyon was no more than a gash in the rugged terrain, narrow at one end, wide at the other, shaped somewhat like a shrunken pear. To the south and east, the cliffs, patched with lichen, rose high; so high he had to crick his neck to glimpse their escarpments, dark-limned against the blue sky. Westward, the palisades were smooth-polished by the elements, and matched the ramparts that frowned across at them for height. A cat could not have scrambled up either. That left the north, the lowest, end. Here a high mesa spilled its eroding rimrock into the canyon. The line of its rim was as flat as a board.

Lefty crunched through the dust and debris of ages, examining the face of the mesa wall, until leaden despair gripped him. No man alive could work his body twenty feet up that cliff.

With sagging shoulders he turned his back upon it and slowly retraced his footsteps. At a random thought, he swung around and again eyed the wall. A hundred feet high—maybe a hundred and ten. Three ropes knotted would span it, but a feller couldn't push a rope up like a pole.

Sandy limped up over the rocky ground.

"First time I wished I had wings," greeted Lefty ruefully.

"You'll git 'em, afore long," said Sandy dryly. "Gimme the makin's!"

"Run out, four days back."

"Gosh!" groaned the freckled rider. "I cain't stomach thet hawseflesh. Now I cain't even take out my belly wrinkles with smoke!"

"Fill up on water," growled Lefty.

"Water! I been spittin' rust f'r a week."

Side by side, the pair sauntered back towards the cave.

Lefty's brain was busy. He stopped beside the pigeon's cage, eyed the bird thoughtfully, then made a beeline for his saddle. Pawing through an assortment of saddlery, shells and strips of rawhide in a saddlebag, he finally pulled out a crumpled writing tablet and a pencil. Dropping down, he chewed the pencil awhile, then laboriously wrote a note:

Dear Al:

I'm in a jack pot with the rest of the boys. The Valley spreads got us corralled in a blind canyon ten days now. 'Pears we're thru—no smokes, eating our horses, and shells short. If you could knot four ropes and drop a line from the north end we might run a sandy over the jaspers. The canyon's located beyond the headwaters of Buckeye. Ride west till Steeple Butte lines on Bald Mesa. We're five miles south of the Butte. Rough country.

If you can't make it—good-bye.

Lefty.

P. S.—Keep your eyes peeled, this neck of the woods is lousy with punchers.

P. P. S. Sure miss you, Al. Reckon it took me plenty time to find it out. So long!

He carefully folded the note, approached the cage and gently grasped the pigeon, pinning its wings. Wrapping the folded sheet around one leg, he secured it with a strip of cotton from his bandanna and threw the pigeon high.

Slowly, it mounted higher and higher, up out of the canyon, in ever-widening circles. A white speck against the blue sky, it poised motionless for a moment, then shot off like an arrow eastward.

Lefty relaxed, felt for the makin's, remembered and swore softly. What chance, he considered, had the girl

to make it? Not one in a hundred. It would tax even a trailwise mountain man to find that hide-away in the maze of upended country bordering the Bad Lands. Even then, she had to find a trail to the top of that mesa overlooking the canyon, and chances were there wasn't one. Not to speak of dodging a passel of punchers. Nope, Al was a good girl, one of the best; but even she was no miracle-maker. It was sure a crazy idea, sending that note—might just as well forget it.

Though reason told him his hunch to send Al a message by the carrier pigeon was futile, Lefty couldn't down hope. He found himself figuring. An hour for the bird to reach Indian Wells. Half a day for Al to ride out. She might be around at sunup! He shook his head half-angrily. She couldn't make it, that was all there was to it. Well, there was no harm in hoping; gave a fellow something to think about besides a noose.

Before the rays of the rising sun gilded the rimrock high above, Lefty groped his way through the gloom, past the drifting shadows of grazing ponies, to the far end of the canyon. Head tilted hopefully, he stood, watching the rim of the mesa above as it gradually became plain in the light that spilled over the crags. At last, it stood sharp-cut, black against the brightening sky, but no human form relieved its flat emptiness.

For an hour the lanky rider lingered, longing, as a condemned man longs to the last moment for a reprieve. Then he turned away, thought of breakfast of horse meat, gagged and hitched his belt a notch tighter.

Throughout the day, the flat rim drew his eyes like a magnet, but no life stirred on the lonely heights.

At dawn, he again resumed his vigil. Deep down he clung to a dogged conviction that Al could not fail. Once again he watched the light of a new day sweep over the sky, and once again he watched in vain.

For a third time—hopelessly now—he stumbled down-

canyon to watch the dawn, and as hopelessly dragged back. Sandy and three volunteers now took spells in manning the barricade. Apathy had so drugged the others that his skinned fists were no longer sufficient to drive them—and he was scared to use his gun. Gunplay against desperate men, he decided, was dynamite.

He flopped slackly among the piñons. Anyone but a knothead, he told himself dejectedly, would have known it was a fool notion. Al would have about as much chance of sneaking through as a sage hen slipping past a pack of coyotes.

He pulled himself to his feet and moved into the cave. Men lay around or drooped dispiritedly against their saddles. His eyes roamed over them. They reminded him of a bunch of condemned prisoners in the death cell, waiting for the rope. And that, he thought ironically, was just what they were.

He drew Sandy to one side. "Reckon our rope's jest about run out," he said laconically.

"Boss," returned the rustler with a strained grin, "I kin feel the doggoned knot behind my ear."

"Wal, I figger we oughta give the boys a break. Maybe if they walked out, hands up, they'd get a fair trial. Those cusses outside are itchin' for my scalp. They hate me worse than a polecat at a picnic."

"I'm stickin'," declared Sandy decisively. "We got plenty ponies tuh butcher, and water. We kin hold out f'ever."

"Forever's a long time. What'll we use for shells? Nope, feller, we got no more chance than a wax cat in hell. You take over the barricade, I wanta get the boys together."

The freckled rider limped up-canyon and presently two men straggled back.

"Come on out!" yelled Lefty towards the cave. "I wanta palaver."

Unshaven, gaunted and dull-eyed, the rustlers shuffled out, gathered lifelessly around him beneath the piñons.

"Fellers," he commenced, without preamble, "the jig's up. They got us tied up tighter than a calf with piggin' strings. Me, I'm gonna stick 'til I got one shell—which is better than hangin'. If any of you jaspers wanta step outside, a-reachin', and take a chance, now's your time. I gotta hunch they want me. You can pitch 'em a windy you broke with me. It's a harp if you stay and a long chance if you leg out." He paused, meeting a battery of bleak, hopeless eyes. He could almost read the thoughts of that hard-bitten bunch as they weighed his words and balanced the odds in their minds. Death was no stranger to these calloused night riders. Life had been a gamble from the first time they blotched a brand or hazed a handful of snorting steers into the Bad Lands.

Dirt shuffled and broke a brittle silence. A squatty, saddle-worn rustler inched forward. "Reckon I'll check out," he growled. Lefty nodded, waited. Three more lined up.

"Any other jaspers crave to take a hand in this deal?" inquired the lean rider crisply. Men stirred indecisively, but not one of the remaining dozen moved forward.

"Hunky dory!" Lefty felt a surge of energy. Action, any kind of action, was a relief after thirteen dead days of waiting. "We got a white shirt left in the bunch?" A man headed for the cave and returned with a dirty strip of what once had been clean linen.

"Let's go!"

The entire party strung out behind him as he strode towards the mouth of the canyon.

They crowded into the passageway and crouched two-deep behind the barricade, staring out into the brilliant sunshine beyond the rocky portals. Nothing moved outside, save tiny lizards darting amid the littered boul-

ders and, behind the fluffing cottonwoods that lined the wash, a porcupine crawling up the slope.

It was hard to believe, frowned Lefty, that death stalked out there. Maybe the punchers had pulled out. He strained his ears, listening for a sound from the dry wash, but heard nothing but the hoarse squawking of jays.

Amid a tight silence, the four rustlers who chose to take a chance straddled the barricade. In single file they moved towards the sunlight outside, their high-heeled boots dragging reluctantly. The first held high a dirty strip of white linen.

The leader emerged into the sun glare, hesitated, waved the linen strip and stepped hesitantly forward. His three companions, eyes darting nervously around, followed.

Still the silence was unbroken, save for the shuffle of boots through sand.

A rifle shot bit through the slumbering silence; another and another, until the still air reverberated with the crash of drumfire.

Clutching his strip of linen, the leader spun crazily, sprawled in the dust. Like clay pigeons, the next two were hammered down, squirming and shrieking. The last man in line ducked, whirled around and darted back, but he, too, was riddled, pitched headlong and lay until the life twitched out of him.

It was all over in ten-fifteen seconds.

Tight-lipped, the rustlers packed behind the barricade eyed the four prone bodies. Silence settled like a pall. The fate of the four was a grim reminder of what awaited them all.

A caustic shout echoed from a concealed puncher in the wash. "Any other gents crave tuh shake hands with St. Peter?"

Chapter 18

A CANYON wren twittered brightly in the sun as the rustlers spilled sullenly back into their refuge, but the bird's joyous notes found no echo in the hearts of the somber-faced men. From a home, the canyon was transformed into a tomb, a giant catacomb in which their bones were doomed to bleach. What matter if they continued to breathe for a day, a week, a month—the end was inevitable. The wanton butchery of their four pards proved that they could expect no mercy.

From habit, Lefty's eyes sought the rim of the mesa. He blinked, stared unbelievingly, stark surprise mirrored upon his features. He grabbed at Sandy's arm. "Take a gander at the rim!"

The freckled rider squinted upwards.

"They's a jasper up there, spreadin' his wings, like he figgers on flyin' down. Guess the bustards outside done found a trail tuh the top. We'll be dodgin' lead pronto."

"You're crazy with the heat!" Lefty's voice left his throat in a joyous yell. "That's Al! I knowed she'd come through!"

Trailed by his ragged, wondering band, he raced madly down-canyon, stumbling and tripping in the loose shale.

High above, standing, it seemed, on the very brink of the precipice, the girl's slight form was plain now. She waved, and Lefty flim-flammed his arms wildly in reply.

Twenty paces from the foot of the wall, he stopped, head tilted. "Howdy, Al!" he shouted.

Faint but distinct, her voice floated down. "Hello, Lefty. Look out for the rope!"

Hope slowly rekindled in a dozen pairs of eyes as a rope—fine as a spider's thread—dropped slowly down to the canyon floor. The rider whirled. "Hey, Jim, Barney! Git me four ropes—rattle your hocks!" With alacrity, the two riders headed towards the saddle at the farther end of the canyon. Like strong wine, reborn hope instilled new life into the beleaguered rustlers. It shone in their eyes, was manifest in their quick, eager movements.

The end of the dangling rope hit ground. A rider grasped it. "Wait awhile!" yelled Lefty to the girl above.

Festooned with ropes—in their eagerness they brought a dozen—the two men panted back. Lefty set the men around knotting four ropes at twelve-inch intervals. This done, he joined the knotted ropes, secured one end to the strand hanging from the height. "Yank her up!" he yelled, "and take a firm dally, I'm comin' up!"

Hand over hand, Alice hauled up the knotted ropes. Below, she could see tensed, white blurs of faces, breathlessly watching the slender thread upon which their lives depended.

The girl stepped back out of sight of the men in the canyon and dallied the rope securely around a lava knob. Lefty pulled on his riding gloves, grasped the knotted line and commenced to shinny up, hauling his body from knot to knot. The loose rope began to spin, swung like a pendulum, smashed him against the cliff. At Sandy's shout, the watching men rushed for the swinging end, yanked it tight, steadying the climber's swaying figure. Gradually he worked higher and higher. Bruised and shaken from contact with the cliff, shoulder muscles aching, he neared the top. Those last few feet were the

most arduous; for the rope, stretched taut over the cliff edge, offered scant hand hold.

Gasping, he struggled at the rim, felt hands beneath his armpits as Alice strove to help him, made a desperate effort and wriggled over the edge.

Chest heaving, he gained his feet. "Gosh, you're a sight for sore eyes, Al!" he blurted. "And you shure look tuckered out," he added, as his eyes took in the girl's white face, lined with fatigue; her flannel shirt and denims, snagged and torn; the brown hair disheveled beneath the brim of her dusty Stetson.

"I spent two days and nights wandering around these wilds, Lefty," she returned, with a tired smile. "I thought I'd never find you."

"You're the only gal in Eagle Valley who could." The heartfelt conviction in the rider's voice brought color to the girl's cheeks.

Lefty's hand strayed towards nonexistent makin's in his shirt pocket. With a doleful grin he dropped his arm. "Can't break a bad habit," he commented.

"I brought some tobacco and papers." Alice delved into a pocket and produced two sacks of Old Kentucky, a book of papers and stinkers.

"Dang it, Al, you're shure a shinin' angel!" ejaculated Lefty with delight. "I been chewin' grass for a week—'fore long I'll be eatin' oats!" He rolled a smoke, lit up and squatted down. "Rest your legs and let's chin!" he invited.

For a while he puffed with pure enjoyment.

"Sheriff git wise?" he inquired at length.

She shook her head. "No one read your message but me, but the bank bandit is dead."

"Dead! I figgered it was a frame-up."

"They killed Con robbing the Wildcat Bank."

With knotted brow, Lefty digested the news in silence. "So that's it!" he murmured finally. "I can see

why the sheriff jugged me. Con and I could pass for each other any time. Heard he rode with the wild bunch. So he came home—to die?"

Alice nodded. Lefty rose, crushed his butt. "Wal, we gotta get the boys out. Be seein' you, Al!" He stepped towards the rim, stretched up on the ground, grasped the rope and slithered over.

Below, the expectant gang gathered around him. Quickly, he had them scurrying around like ants. Three of the youngest climbed the rope; the remainder headed for the cave, to pack out the wounded. Within the hour, every man was up on the rim, except the guards at the barricade, still unaware of their good fortune, and the two leaders.

"Shore hate tuh leave them bronks," observed Sandy regretfully, as the last man was hauled up. "It'll be plain hell leggin' it."

"We're not leggin'," grunted Lefty. "If you'll stick 'til nightfall with the jaspers on lookout, I'll go rustle us some ponies."

"Whar?"

Lefty jerked a thumb towards the entrance. "I aim to set these coyotes outside afoot. Now listen . . . !"

Again the wiry rider went up the cliff. This trip was easier. He stepped into a loop and the men above hauled, hand over hand.

Three men were left behind with the ropes, while the remainder, assisting the wounded, followed Lefty eastward along the rim. For a mile they traversed the mesa-top, barren and bereft of vegetation. Rockbound slopes, rising to ragged pinnacles, blocked egress to the south. Northward the mesa spread, flat as a billiard table, shadowed by escarpments, as far as the eye could reach. Then, abruptly, the slow-moving bunch of men pulled up short on the eastern edge, and eyed trees and chaparral a hundred feet below.

Lefty examined the rim, weaving in an unbroken line northward.

"How in heck did you git up here?" he asked Alice, with a puzzled frown.

"I really don't know," she confessed. "The mesa flattens at the northern end; I must have stumbled upon a trail."

Lefty shrugged. "Wal, we can't pack these jaspers much further. 'Sides, I got a job to do at sundown. This spot's as good as any to drop down." He motioned to an alert young rider. "Go get the boys with the twine, Jerry."

Shadows were lengthening by the time the last man was lowered and the rope was returned to the canyon rim. The rustlers, burdened by their wounded, were as helpless afoot as hobbled horses.

Eyes sought Lefty for guidance.

"Take the weight off your dogs, boys," he directed. "I want three horse thieves."

Pressing forward through thick brush, weaving between towering trunks of bull pine and clambering over granite outcrops, the four worked southward. Lefty placed the location of the canyon entrance at a mile south and slightly more than that distance west. The brush thinned. A rider suddenly exclaimed, "Hell, heah's the canyon trail!" He pointed to a hoof-pocked trail winding through the trees.

"Listen!" exclaimed Lefty sharply. From the west, spasmodic gunfire punched through the still evening air.

"Sandy's stirrin' the snakes up," he grunted. "I figgered it would help some. Let's go!"

In single file, they moved down the trail, as silent and alert as an Apache raiding party.

In the thickening purple, four men ghosted up the sandy wash. The odor of skunkweed, crushed beneath their boots, rose thick and pungent. Lefty, ahead, held

up a restraining hand. The three rustlers checked while he continued to inch along the foot of the crumbling bank.

The camp of the cowmen and their crews was close now, hidden by the curving wash. No longer did an ominous quiet brood over the canyon entrance. Rifles barked continuously from the slit in the cliff, and Winchesters from the wash spat back in swift reply. The punchers, bored by long hours of enforced idleness, entered into the fray with zest. At last the trapped rustlers, after days of sullen silence, were biting back. Perhaps, knowing their end was near, they had determined upon a break. With these thoughts, Porky and his fellow cowmen threw every puncher into the fracas. Shoulder to shoulder, waddies lined the wash, pouring a steady stream of lead into the dark portals of the canyon.

Ahead of Lefty the wash twisted. A gliding shadow in the gloom, he reached the bend, yanked off his Stetson and peered around. His pulse quickened with subdued excitement. Ahead, the bed of the wash widened. Saddled and bridled, a long row of ponies were picketed close by, tied to a long catch rope strung between two saplings. Beyond the ponies, the ashes of campfires smoked sluggishly, bedrolls heaped around them, while the bank to the right was thick with the sprawled forms of sharp-shooting riders.

For a space, Lefty studied the ponies intently. If he took time to loose each one, chances were the clatter of their hoofs would attract attention. He might get away with six or eight, but his plans called for a clean sweep of the attackers' horseflesh. If he loosened the long catch rope, the ponies would probably mill and tangle. Before he could extricate them and drive them clear, the fast-shooting waddies would make a sieve out of him.

He pulled back out of sight and hunkered against the bank to figure. The stake was big. A fool play now

could ruin his hand—and leave his gang afoot, at the mercy of the cowmen. It was all or nothing; either he cleaned up the jack pot or checked out.

Flickering light, growing steadily stronger, illumined the cottonwoods that stretched gaunt limbs overhead.

Lefty rose, backtracked to a spot where the bank had caved in and crawled up the loose, gravelly slope. The nightly watch fires had just been ignited on each side of the canyon entrance. Out of the line of fire of the rustlers behind the barricade inside, punchers were heaping them high with dry brush. As the flames mounted, the defenders' defiant fire intensified.

The rider slid down to the wash again and moved back to the bend. The ponies were vague blotches now in the dying light, and the waddies lining the bank invisible, except for the fire that stabbed from their Winchesters.

Lefty flicked open his Barlow knife, crouched low and cat-toed forward. Ponies loomed to his left. The animals pulled back in fright as he sliced through the catch rope. Trusting to the reverberating gunfire to drown sound of the uneasy ponies' stamping hoofs, the rider worked rapidly down the line, sundering the rope every few paces.

Behind him, the released ponies were milling in confusion. With a prayer of thankfulness for the concealing darkness, and Sandy's aid in keeping the punchers busy, Lefty continued to slash with the speed of desperation.

The last pony freed, he reached the end of the line. Twenty paces distant, empties tinkled in unending chorus as the attackers industriously threw lead.

Lefty straddled the nearest pony. Throwing all caution to the wind, he hazed the cavvy herd down the wash with voice and swinging rope end. Stretched low over the pony's withers, the stolen saddle horses streaming before him between the confining banks, he awaited the hail of bullets that would announce discovery. A

startled yell floated to his ears. Then he rounded the bend of the wash and straightened, sheltered from immediate lead. Three figures materialized from the gloom, dashed into the close-packed remuda and swung into leather.

Together, the four urged the saddle stock into a gallop. Steadily growing more distant, the rifle fire behind them faltered; a confusion of angry shouting drifted through the night. Lefty chuckled. It looked like Lady Luck was on his side once again.

Two hours later, a jubilant band of horsemen headed eastward, with plenty of spare saddle ponies on the lead.

Alice pulled up to Lefty's stirrup. "Why all the extra ponies? It seems that we'd save time and trouble if we loosed them."

"Later, maybe," agreed the tall rider. "Right now we gotta be plumb sure that pack of wolves is afoot."

"But they'll find your ponies in the canyon."

Lefty laughed silently. "Sure! But I had the boys yank the plates off them. Isn't one but'll be lamed afore they hit hills."

"But how will the poor fellows get back?" persisted Alice.

"Leg it!" he replied tersely.

The night was far spent when the jingling cavalcade left the wild country behind and wound through rolling foothills.

On the floor of the Valley, Lefty halted the bunch. The rustlers switched to the spare ponies and loosed the jaded mounts that had carried them from the fringe of the Bad Lands. The band split. One man jogged northward with the wounded; the remainder divided into two parties and cantered into the gloom. Alone with Lefty, Alice watched as the night riders disappeared into the shadowed hills.

"Where are they going?" she inquired in bewilderment.

"To fire the Boxed R and Triple S barns," he grunted.

"Oh, Lefty, is it necessary?"

"This isn't a picnic," he replied shortly. "Let's ride—I gotta see you safe to town."

For a while they jogged along in silence.

"What fools men are!" the girl burst out suddenly. "Fighting and killing and burning, all for a few square miles of range. They'll hate you, Lefty, just like they hated Paw. Can't you see how utterly senseless it all is?"

"I can't quit," he replied slowly. "You know the law of the wolf pack—claw or be clawed. Right now, that's the law of the range—if I don't claw, they'll tear the Circle L apart.

"As for hate"—his voice deepened with bitterness—"if you hadn't aced us outa that canyon, the sidewinders woulda plugged every jasper. Four of the boys went out, hands high. What did they get? Lead! Say, Al, I reckon I'm beginning to feel jest like Paw felt—and I got some scores to pay off."

"Hate breeds hate! Someone must stop this—somehow," she replied, quiet determination in her voice. "Feuds and fighting! How I detest it all!"

"There's no one can stop it," he declared. "If you figger on tossin' the spread to the jaspers to quieten them, forget it! I'll prod the bustards 'til they'll be scared to chowse a stray off Circle L range."

The girl sensed his gathering anger and changed the topic. "Now that you've been cleared of the bank robberies, you could ride away and leave all this hatred behind you," she observed, staring straight ahead.

"Nope, I'm stickin'!" Alice again thought of Lobo at sound of his deep, dogged voice. "I came home peaceful, but I got different notions now."

For a spell they rode in silence. "Remember the night before—you rode away?" she asked.

Lefty's thoughts flew back to the midnight meeting on the flats.

"Yep!" he replied shortly.

"Desert Dan is my uncle."

"You don't say!"

"He rode into the mountains after Maw and Paw—died. He hated the Circle L."

"Reckon he had good cause," agreed Lefty.

"And I was not double-crossing the spread, as you had reason to suspect," the girl continued. She hesitated. "I had a feeling Dan could throw light on your paw's death."

The rider's head swiveled. "Did Dan blast Paw?" he demanded harshly.

"No, but I believe he knows who did."

Outside the canyon, bewildered punchers stumbled through the darkness, seeking traces of their vanished ponies. Curiously, the return fire from the canyon had ceased.

Porky Pawson, cushioned on his paunch, stared at the dark gash of the canyon entrance, his shrewd eyes slitted. Beside him, Lefevre cursed beneath his breath.

"The rattlesnakes jest couldn't git out," reiterated the Boxed R foreman. "I know thet canyon; they'd hev tuh fly out, and the bustards ain't growed wings—yet."

Porky chuckled. "I got ten thet sez they rustled our saddle stock, and another ten sez there ain't a rustler in thet canyon."

"They was shootin' not an hour back."

"They ain't shootin' now—they ain't there tuh shoot."

"You ain't got the guts tuh prove it!" snarled Lefevre.

Porky heaved his bulk over the edge of the wash. His

rotund form was plain in the light of the watch fires as he waddled across the bouldery flat and stepped over the bodies of the slain rustlers. Two score men watched, as he disappeared into the darkness between the rugged portals.

Chapter 19

EVEN the phlegmatic Hippo blinked when Sheriff Waters broke the smoke-shrouded silence of the office with the bland inquiry, "Kin you jaspers lay hands on a tame chipmunk hereabouts?"

"A—a what?" swallowed Dakota.

"A chipmunk, cousin tuh a squirrel; eats nuts."

The deputy glanced at Hippo. That worthy tapped his forehead significantly. "The sun done got him," he mumbled, "or mebbe this Circle L fracas drove him loco. Reckon I'll go git the doc."

"Cut the wisecracks," snapped Waters. "I kin use thet chipmunk."

Dakota considered. "Seems like I lamped one in a cage, outside a Mex adobe."

The sheriff dropped a dollar on the desk. "Buy it or borrow it, and hightail. We gotta ride."

Inside fifteen minutes, the swarthy deputy returned, a small, slatted box tucked under his arm. He set it on the desk, let down one end and withdrew a furry little chipmunk. Held it out, nested in the palm of his brown hand. "Greaser kid owns him, regular pet," he explained.

Hippo eyed it suspiciously. "Mebbe it bites like Dan's —plumb pison, he claimed."

Dakota stroked the tiny creature. "This critter's warranted halter-broke and harmless. Lamp this!" He straightened his arm. The chipmunk ran up his sleeve and perched upon his shoulder.

"Friendly little cuss," said Dakota, pushing it back into the box. "Now, how in heck d'ye figger using it?"

"You'll see!" grunted Waters, reaching for his Stetson. "Right now yore packin' it out tuh the Circle L."

He stepped outside. Dakota thrust back his shapeless hat, directed a quizzical glance at the chipmunk, then at Hippo.

"Bring me back a nut!" grinned the burly deputy.

"Thet'll make two," snorted Dakota, grabbed the box and hastened after the sheriff.

Circling riders held a herd on the flat that fronted the Circle L ranch house. Although Lefty and his raiders had harried the surrounding spreads night and day since the affair in the canyon, not a Circle L steer had been touched. Unhindered, Porky's punchers combed the canyons and draws, gathered the stuff at the ranch and cut out steers for shipment to the stockyards.

The fat foreman waddled out of the bunkhouse as the two lawmen rode in. Waters piled out of leather.

"Howdy, Porky!" he greeted affably. "Any trouble with Lefty's gang?"

Pawson chuckled. "Not a mite! But he's shore raisin' hell all around." He eyed the sheriff shrewdly. "You taking a hand? Lefevre claims you keep outa range wars."

The sheriff lifted his shoulders. "Yeah," he replied noncommittally, "but I got something else on my mind." Watching Porky closely, he could have sworn a veil of wary caution dropped over the foreman's

deep-bedded eyes, but easy geniality wreathed the fat features.

"Spill it!" invited the foreman.

"Lobo's killing ain't never been cleaned up."

Porky shrugged carelessly. "I laid it tuh Conrad. Thet shorthorn was mighty free with a gun."

"Mebbe, but he didn't blast Desert Dan and clean out his cache."

"Ain't acquainted with the gink," came back the foreman swiftly. "How come you brace me?"

"You git around—figgered yuh mighta picked up something."

"You shore git notions, sheriff!" Porky's heavy shoulders shook with amusement. "Mebbe Lefty, now, could help yuh. He spends plenty time hidin' out in the Bad Lands and I guess he could use a little dinero."

Dakota sauntered up. "Hey, Jim!" he drawled. "Look at the kitty I jest found me. Ain't it a beaut!" He lifted the chipmunk from the crook of his arm.

"Give the danged thing tuh Porky!" growled the sheriff. "I got plenty other animals tuh think of—two-legged animals."

"Ketch!" Dakota nonchalantly pitched the little bundle of fur towards the rotund foreman. It hit his protruding belly, hooked onto his belt and scurried madly up the front of his grey shirt.

A sudden transformation came over the jovial Porky. His jaw dropped with dismay, fear gleamed in his small eyes. Backing, he clawed frantically at the animal.

Dakota darted forward, grabbing the chipmunk as it ran around the back of the flustered foreman's neck. "You ain't scairt, Porky—of a chipmunk?" There was amused surprise in Waters' voice.

"Git the damned thing outa heah!" panted the foreman, regarding the animal with uneasy eyes. "Their bite's pison."

"Quit the skallyhootin', Dakota!" said the sheriff sternly. "Thet's no way f'r a lawman tuh act!"

The deputy fondled his chipmunk. "Ain't nuthin' tuh be scairt of," he grumbled. "I've tamed 'em aplenty." Sulkily, he moved away toward his pony.

"Yuh don't hev tuh git flustered," Waters addressed Porky soothingly. "Thet doggoned deputy's animal crazy—loosed a skunk in the office oncet. So yuh warn't acquainted with Dan?"

"Never set eyes on the hairpin." The foreman's big belly was still quivering.

The sheriff turned resignedly towards his pony. "Wal, I guess I'm wasting time around heah. So-long!"

He stepped into the saddle and Dakota swung into leather beside him.

Porky watched them, speculation in his eyes, until they disappeared from view around a wing of the ranch house. Then he swung his bulk around and strode quickly across the yard. Entering the bunkhouse, he commenced tossing razor, shaving brush, towel and other personal belongings into his war sack.

The sheriff and deputy drifted through the dust raised by the churning steers on the flat.

"Porky don't cotton tuh chipmunks," chuckled Dakota. "The greasy hawg was scairt stiff."

"Mebbe he got cause," returned the sheriff dryly. "Ain't yuh heard the saying—once bit, twice shy?"

Back in town, Waters slid down into his swivel chair, elevated his long legs on the desk and built a smoke. Hat brim slanted over his eyes, he puffed placidly and reviewed events in Eagle Valley. Dakota and Hippo retired to the comparative coolness of the adobe jail for a hand or two of crib.

Outside, the sheriff heard hesitant footsteps. Alice Branford peeked through the open doorway, saw that he was alone and stepped inside. Waters hastily wrig-

gled into an upright position. "Grab a chair, ma'am!" he invited.

Alice perched gingerly upon the edge of a chair and eyed the lawman uncertainly.

"Anything on yore mind?" he prompted.

"Yes, the Circle L. Can't we stop this fighting?" Once started, words flooded from the perturbed girl. "This feud can't go on forever. Men have been killed; more will be killed." Her rising voice reflected the intensity of her feelings. "And what will be the result? Nothing but hatred, more hatred, and the range reeks with it now."

"You own the Circle L, ma'am—you got any ideas?" Waters' quizzical grey eyes searched her flushed features.

"Yes! Get the cowmen together, Lefty too, and hammer common sense into their mule-heads," she replied tersely. "As long as Lefty's alive they'll never run their cows on Circle L grass—in peace."

The sheriff pondered. Plainly, the girl was right. Lefty and his bunch of desperados would never quit until they were wiped out, and that was plainly too big a job for the three spreads he was bedeviling. The sensible way out was a truce. Maybe a little plain talk would set them right. Looked like this quiet, brown-haired girl had something there.

"Kin yuh git aholt of Lefty?" he queried.

Alice nodded.

"Tell the maverick tuh ride inter the Lazy J—peaceful. Lemme see!"—Waters rasped his chin—"T'morrow, after sundown. Give him my word he'll ride out—peaceful."

The girl slipped off her chair, eyes shining. "Thank you, Sheriff, I'm so relieved!"

Waters smiled, a trifle ruefully. "Save yore thanks,

ma'am. Ef we kin git thet bunch of bronks tuh water at the same trough it'll be a miracle."

"At heart Lefty wants peace," she returned defensively.

"Yeah!" growled the sheriff. "So did Lobo—on his own terms."

He watched the girl patter away towards Main Street, then bent his steps in the direction of the jail.

Squatting in the semi-darkness of a cell cooled by the thick adobe walls and roof, his two deputies were busy with a pack of dog-eared cards and a cribbage board.

"Break it up!" snapped Waters. "You—Dakota—ride f'r the Triple S and Circle L. Git word tuh Soothby and Porky I want 'em at the Lazy J t'morrow at sundown. You take word tuh Lefevre and Thorburn, Hippo."

Three men lounged on the gallery of the Lazy J, while Jed Thorburn's rocker creaked ponderously. Cigarettes glowed red in the gloom. Soothby's querulous voice broke a heavy silence. "Wal, what are we waiting for?"

"Lefty—and Porky, but I warn't exactly expectin' Porky," came back the sheriff's even tones.

"Lefty!" echoed Lefevre loudly.

"The same!" drawled a voice from the darkness, and the tall rider's pony drifted up to the gallery steps. He peeled out of leather.

Amid a tension that was as brittle as thin ice, the marauder mounted the steps. "Nix on the gunplay," cautioned the sheriff sharply. "I'm roddin' this powwow. Rest yore laigs, Lefty!" His voice rose. "Dakota!" The deputy ghosted forward from the end of the gallery. "Gather up their guns!"

Lefevre was the only one of the four who growled

protest when Dakota made the rounds and again faded into the background with an armful of Colts.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "When spreads tangle, I don't butt in—but this is different. You—Jed, Lanky and the Colonel—are actin' like range hawgs. When Lobo was around it was different, but a gal rods the Circle L now and Jedge McFarlane is executor. The Jedge is sore, gents, and he packs plenty weight. He sez cowmen who'd rustle a gal's range rates with rattlesnakes."

"You fergettin' Lefty's night riders?" rasped Lefevre.

"Button up!" snapped Waters. "Lemme finish. Right now the Jedge is preparing tuh file suit f'r plenty damages. And when thet pretty gal steps on tuh the witness stand, gents, the jury'll strip the hides offen yuh. Now, as tuh Lefty. He done run foul of the law aplenty. Arson draws a ten-year term—and rustlin' ain't lawful, these days." Waters paused, regarding the dim forms of hard-breathing cowmen and continued. "We kin settle this peaceful. You gents pull yore cows off Circle L range, and keep 'em off. You, Lefty, quit hellin' around. In short, smoke the pipe of peace, or—dammit—I'll start raisin' hell, pronto."

"We got a right tuh free government range," grated Lefevre. "Lobo grabbed it through gunsmoke—so kin we!"

"Free range!" echoed the sheriff, with mild derision. "It done cost yuh plenty punchers, a passel of cows and three barns—and yuh ain't through settlin' the score yet."

"You said a mouthful!" broke in Lefty.

"Lock thet fool trap," returned the sheriff brusquely. "Yore turn'll come. What you gotta say, Jed?"

Heads turned towards the Lazy J owner's massive form, swaying slowly in the rocker. "Ain't no sense

lockin' horns," he rumbled. "I kin bury the hatchet."

"You, Colonel?"

Soothby fidgeted, coughed. "Ef Jed is satisfied, it suits me."

"And what say you, Lanky?" The Boxed R foreman glowered in silence. Left alone, he knew his spread would be overwhelmed by Lefty's night riders. And he also knew that, with the sheriff and Judge McFarlane ranged against him, he could expect no redress. Jim Waters was a patient man, but when angered, even the bleak-eyed Dakota, silent in the shadows, couldn't match him for cold-blooded ruthlessness. The Judge, too, could hamstring the Boxed R with civil suits.

"Aw, hell!" he choked, "I'll string along."

"Ain't thet nice!" commented Waters blandly. "Now, Lefty, we gotta hear from you—the penitentiary or the pipe of peace?"

"I'll lay off the jaspers, if they lay off the Circle L."

The sheriff rose, stretched. "Hey, Dakota, give 'em their guns; it's all settled peaceful." He swung towards the belligerents, each busy with his own thoughts. His voice was as hard as granite. "Ef any of you hombres 'cross me, I swear tuh Gawd you'll wish you was never born. Wal, so long, gents!"

Lefty dogged the sheriff as he moved toward the row of tied ponies. "Say, how come Porky wasn't invited tuh the party?"

"He was," said Waters shortly, "but he was too busy tryin' tuh dodge a murder warrant."

"I don't git yuh."

"Yuh don't hev to!" The sheriff swung on his heel, loosed his pony and stepped into the saddle. "Le's go, Dakota."

Forehead corrugated, Lefty stood staring after the lawman as they jogged into the night. In tight silence, Lefevre and Soothby brushed by and hit leather.

Slowly, Lefty unknotted his reins, forked his mount and jogged out of the Lazy J yard. Murder! That meant Lobo; who else could it mean?

Another rider eased up beside him as he left the spread behind. Sandy pulled over. "Wal, I guess we nurse cows from now on. Mebbe yuh could use a work hawse, sway-backed and saddlesore, but with mighty good intentions?"

Lefty jerked out of his fit of abstraction. "How come you know such a danged lot?"

The freckled rider grinned. "Hell, I was all straddled out under the gallery. Thet doggoned sheriff shore laid down the law tuh you ornery jaspers."

"I got one more job to do, and I'm through," said Lefty soberly.

"Wal, heah's a saddle-stiff tuh side yuh, boss!"

"Nope, this is a one-man job. That hog Porky beefed Paw."

Chapter 20

THE sheriff and his swarthy deputy clip-clopped along the wagon road that snaked through the hills towards Indian Wells. Dakota's puzzled voice broke the quiet. "How come yuh handed Lefty a bum steer?"

"Cut the deck deeper!" grunted Waters.

"Wal, yuh allowed Porky was wanted f'r murder. Lefty'll jest naturally figger he beefed Lobo—we ain't wised up no one about Dan. He'll hit Porky's trail and there'll be gunplay, sure'n hell."

" 'Pears we think alike." The flat irony in the sher-

iff's voice was lost upon the perplexed deputy. "Ain't we supposed tuh git Porky?" he demanded. "Lefty's gotta right tuh cross guns with the sidewinder. Porky blasted Lobo and 'crossed Jedge McFarlane and the gal. The hawg's been stealin' the Circle L blind."

"You got me tangled worse'n a kitten in a ball of twine," confessed Dakota. "Porky was alwus kind of a friendly cuss. Mebbe he had cause tuh rub out Dan."

"I'll say he had," shot back the sheriff. "It took plenty figgerin', but I guess I got him dead tuh rights."

"F'r gosh sakes, spill it!" pleaded the deputy.

Waters eased himself in the saddle. "Wal, it's a long story—damn nigh as long as this doggoned trail—but this is how I got it laid out. Porky was segundo of the Circle L; Lobo hired him because he's the fastest gun hand around—and Lobo liked gunnies. Now, Porky may be fat, but he's fast-thinking. He knew Lobo had heart trouble and was due tuh check out. And he had his eye on the spread. Conrad and Lefty Lingren had pulled out, years before. George would inherit the Circle L and Porky had thet big soak hawg-tied. Then Lobo upset the wagon. He put a notice in the Border papers, askin' Conrad and Lefty tuh beat it f'r home. Porky moved fast. They's only one direct trail from the Border—through Thunder Pass. Porky hires four gunnies, sets them on stolen Boxed R hawses—cunning as a coyote!—and has them watch the Pass.

"They jump Lefty, but he busts through. Packs the carcasses of two of the jaspers tuh the Circle L and has a confab with Lobo.

"Porky figgers he's gotta git shut of Lefty—pronto—afore he grabs the spread.

"Lefty rides f'r the Boxed R tuh return the bodies, and gives Porky a wide-open chance. He dogs Lefty, fills his roll with lead when he beds down at Willow

Spring. But Lefty's no slouch—he ain't inside the bedroll.

"Lobo rides bright and early f'r town. Porky figgers the old man plans tuh change his will in Lefty's favor. Porky don't take no chances—he's playing f'r big stakes. He rides after Lobo, ketches him in Stony Gulch, blasts him from behind.

"Desert Dan's headin' f'r his mine. He lamps the killin'. 'Member you picked up his tracks? Like a jughead, he puts Porky wise. Right then he's as good as daid. Killings come easy after the first. They shore don't faze Porky!

"He salivated Dan in the cabin from behind! The chipmunk bit him—nipped his gun hand. Most animal bites are pizon, ef yuh don't clean the wound good. Porky's hand got infected, swelled. 'Member the bandage? When yuh sprung the tame chipmunk on him at the ranch he was scairt stiff—scared of its pizon teeth. Thet put the deadwood on Porky!

"The will's read and the gal gits the ranch, not George. Porky guessed wrong! Wal, half a loaf's better'n none. He lands the job of foreman, tuh sell off the stock. F'r every steer he ships, he trails another tuh a spread he bought across the mountains, in Ute County. His brand's the Circle U—jest stick a leg on Lingren's L brand and yuh got it."

"Jeepers!" ejaculated Dakota fervently. "Yore shore some figgerer!"

"Thet's what they pay me f'r," returned Waters complacently.

"But yuh tipped off Porky, springin' thet chipmunk on the hairpin. Now, he's done vamoosed."

"Not on yore life! Porky's fingers are sticky. 'Member he cleaned out Dan's cache? It ain't his nature tuh leave behind all thet Circle L beef he misbranded. He'll market the Circle U herd and then beat it with a roll big

enough tuh choke a hawse—thet is, ef Lefty don't git him. Failing thet, the sheriff of Ute County is packin' a warrant."

The deputy ruminated awhile. "Gamble Lefty won't trail the coyote, not tuh Ute County."

"Say!" said the sheriff scornfully. "Ef Lefty's half as smart as his paw—and he's doggone smarter—he knows more about the Circle U than I do."

"Why sick Lefty on the jasper?" persisted Dakota. "Porky totes twin guns—and he's fast."

"Lefty's too doggoned free with thet swiveled six-gun and he raised plenty hell around heah. Mebbe Porky'll trim him down tuh size," the sheriff explained unemotionally.

"Porky gits Lefty and the Ute sheriff gits Porky," muttered Dakota in chastened voice. "Doggonit, Jim, you figger men like yuh figger a checker game. It ain't scarcely human."

"I aim tuh rod the law," replied Waters indifferently. "I reckon we got the Valley quieted down agen."

"Wal, one thing's shore," declared the deputy fervently. "I ain't hittin' no crooked trail—not as long as yore around, playin' checkers!"

Dawn saw a solitary rider, antlike in the immensity, crawling towards the slash in the Apaches that was Ute Pass. Steadily he plugged ahead, ever upward, through a barren wasteland. Around him, boulder-strewn benches slanted like giant stairs towards the mountains. High above soared untrodden peaks, far-stretched in a mighty chain. Bleak and forbidding, the bald summits glowed with the light of the rising sun.

Wind whistled through the pony's distended nostrils as it labored higher and higher. The mouth of the pass loomed black. Lefty pulled rein before the beetling por-

tals; the talus of the ages crunched beneath his pony's hoofs.

The lone rider loosened the latigos and rocked his saddle, then rolled a smoke and surveyed the spread of country below, stretching away until it was wreathed in purple mist. Ridges and ravines criss-crossed like a crazy quilt, out of which great mesas thrust their square heads and towering buttes pushed skyward like blunt fingers.

Lefty stamped out his butt, tightened the cinches, hit leather again and entered the gloomy depths of the pass. Far behind him, a straggling column of specks bobbed in his wake. Sandy was not the type to be left out of the final showdown, and he brought his rustlers along. Now that peace had spread its serene wings over Eagle Valley, that was the safest way to keep them out of mischief.

For a mile, Lefty threaded through the debris that had spilled into the narrow pass from the heights above. Then the trail sloped downward, the confining walls dropped away and a vast expanse of sage and mesquite spread before him, shadowed by the mountain chain.

The rider's blue eyes hardened as they picked up a cluster of ranch buildings, dwarfed by distance to the size of toys, huddled around a windmill. If his hunch was correct, Porky was there right now—and plenty of Circle L cows.

He dropped down towards the plain. The shadow of the mountains crept closer as the sun slanted higher. No longer did the pony's shoes ring upon rock. Grey dust boiled around horse and rider, veiling them in a grey haze, as they jogged through the thorny mesquite, across the faded carpet of the sage.

No qualms as to the outcome of the inevitable showdown with Porky troubled the tall rider, set slack in the saddle, bandanna taut over mouth and nose to sift out

the floating dust. The foreman had killed his paw. He'd kill Porky, or Porky would kill him.

The sun arced high. Ahead, the windmill was plainly outlined now against the cloudless sky, its blades slow-turning in a lazy, sage-scented breeze. No thought of the back trail entered Lefty's mind. If it had, he might have swung around and sighted a score of dust streamers steadily beating towards him. Sandy's bunch, eager to take a hand, was not sparing horseflesh.

Cows broke and blundered in the brush before the slow-moving rider. Circle U cows, he noted—every brand blotched!

A grey adobe ranch house loomed through the dust, corrals strung to one side, jacals on the other. Around the jacals dark-featured vaqueros, with huge steeple-topped sombreros, idled. A pony was tied outside the adobe; a powerful grey—Porky's!

Lefty jerked his bandanna down and hefted his gun. Ignoring the staring Mexicans, he headed straight for the house.

A rotund figure rose from a chair on the shaded porch and stepped out into the sunlight. It was Porky, grinning with cold amusement.

Thirty paces distant, Lefty checked his pony, swung to the ground and stepped sideways, clear of the animal.

"Howdy!" came Porky's shrill falsetto. "How come you ridin' inter Ute County?"

"To get you!"

The fat foreman's shoulders shook with amusement, but his arms hung loose above the butts of his holstered guns. "Ain't a jasper in Eagle Valley kin git me. But I'm gonna git you, you doggoned Lingren cockerel!"

"You blasted Paw!" flung Lefty, standing, slightly stooped, on the sun-baked ground.

"Shore!" chuckled Porky. "I shoulda got you!" He dropped into a swift crouch. Venomous, his small eyes

squinted at the tall rider from beneath the brim of his Stetson. Slowly, his right arm crooked and his pudgy fingers closed on a gun butt.

Lefty's hand, fingers bent, was poised above his swiveled six-gun. For a second, they faced each other, still as statues, tensed and silent.

Then Porky's gun hand darted up. The sun glinted on blue steel as a circling gun barrel blurred. Lefty's holster jerked to the horizontal. The reports blended as two guns flamed red. Lefty staggered. It seemed as though a sledge hammer had slammed against his shoulder. Numbness paralyzed his right side. He straightened, planted his feet apart. Once again, the two guns thundered. Porky had the edge this time.

Again a sledge hammer rocked the lean rider. There was no pain, but his right leg seemed suddenly transformed into soft rubber. It buckled. Helplessly, he flopped sideways, tried to roll over—and failed.

Like a log, he lay, dust floating like a shroud around him, as he wrenched his smoking gun out of the holster. He leveled, thumbed the trigger—felt the smart of a slug as it brushed his cheek.

For a fourth time, in bleak-eyed desperation, he threw down on Porky's fleshy form. As the gun bucked from the explosion, flame again tipped the foreman's iron, and the bullet beat into the heat-hardened earth with a crack like a bull whip, spraying dust into Lefty's slitted eyes.

Automatically, the rider had been counting his shots. One shell left—and Porky was still on his feet, the eternal grin glued to his fat features, and another gun swinging at his side. Gawd! was the jasper bullet-proof?

Stretched out in the dust, half-paralyzed, Lefty loosed his last shell through the swirling powder smoke. Still Porky stayed on his feet. Lefty twisted his body, fumbled at his gunbelt for more shells. . . . Myriad stars

exploded in his brain. Thunder jarred his eardrums. A black flood engulfed his consciousness. Limbs relaxed, he lay, a bloodied, dusty figure, sprawled limp on the bare earth. A thin wisp of smoke curled from the muzzle of his empty gun.

Chapter 21

BULKING beneath the blankets on the brass bed, Lefty stared with a puzzled frown at the white-tinted wall. He tried to move but desisted with a groan as red-hot pokers skewered his side. Blue eyes clouded beneath the white bandage that circled his shaven head, he strove desperately to think back through the fog that clouded his mind. The Apaches—mesquite—dust—Porky. Porky! With a stabbing flash memory returned. He had crossed guns with Porky and that grinning hog downed him—with an unused gun bumping against his left leg to finish him off.

How come he was not worm feed? Porky was on his feet and shooting when the world exploded in a burst of stars. Lefty stared at the curtains billowing in a slight breeze, glimpsed the smooth-rounded tops of hills. Heck, this was the Circle L and this was his paw's old bed, freighted by ox-team from Kansas City before steel stretched against the prairie. The low, rumbling bellow of a herd floated through the open window. Plenty beef around, too.

At sound of a quick, light step, Lefty's eyes turned towards the door. Alice peeked in, entered softly. A de-

lighted smile clothed her features as she met Lefty's eyes.

"Howdy, Al!" he ejaculated, and was amazed when the words grated out in a hoarse whisper.

"You're conscious again!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Lefty, you really had us worried. Doctor Caldwell said your wounds would kill two ordinary men, but you had the constitution of an ox."

"I'm not bullet-proof, like Porky," he whispered. "How come the sidewinder didn't finish me?" He choked back a groan as the effort of framing words threw a trip hammer into action inside his head.

"Now, be still!" she commanded sternly. "You mustn't get excited. I'll have Sandy tell you everything; I'm tired of chasing him outside."

For a while, Lefty lay alone. He closed his eyes and the pounding in his head gradually subsided.

Spurs jingled. Sandy, his freckled face solemn, slid through the doorway and sidled up to the bed. The wounded man's eyelids flicked up. "Howdy!" he whispered.

"Now, no excitement, Sandy!" cautioned Alice, fluttering anxiously in the background.

"I'll be as quiet as a wooden Injun, ma'am," the rustler assured her earnestly. He sat down carefully on the edge of the bed, eyeing the white-faced, bandaged figure.

"Cain't kill a mule," he grinned. "They're too doggoned stubborn tuh cash in."

"Where's Porky?"

"Daid!"

"You salivate the bustard?"

"Waste of lead. He was dying on his feet when we rode in."

"Who kilt him?"

"You did!"

Lefty tried to shake his head in negation, quit abruptly

when the trip hammer sprang into swift operation. "F'r gosh sakes, chew it fine," he urged faintly.

"Wal"—from long habit the freckled rider felt for his tobacco sack—"I gathered the boys and dogged yuh tuh the Circle U. Yuh warn't acing me outa the fracas. We most ran the laigs off them ponies, but yuh beat us tuh the spread. Gunfire hit our ears and we busted our guts tuh git in f'r the finish, but it was all over but the shouting when we pulled in. 'Peared you'd gone tuh Kingdom Come with two slugs in yore right shoulder, one under yore ribs and a hell of a hole in your conk. But yore pump was still tickin', so we washed off the blood, plugged the holes, roped yuh on a hawse and packed yore carcass back tuh the Circle L. Thet was three-four days back."

"Porky?" groaned the patient impotently.

"Oh, hell!" grinned Sandy. "Yuh couldn't miss thet fat hawg with yore eyes shut. Yuh tagged him five times, nary a miss. His gun-arm was broke, two in the belly and two in the lungs, but he was on his feet tryin' tuh steady his left gun, when I fust lamped him. Then he crashed. Gotta hand it tuh the jasper, he died game. Cussed us 'til he choked in his own blood."

Lefty grinned—to heck with the trip hammer!

"We drove back a prime herd," continued Sandy. "The boys are rebranding on the flat right now."

Alice stepped forward. "I think that's enough, Sandy. Lefty must not be excited."

"As you say, ma'am, but lead don't faze him none." The freckled rider rose, raised his arm in jaunty farewell. "So long, boss, be seein' yuh!"

The girl hovered around, while the footsteps of the happy-go-lucky night rider died down the passageway.

"Danged good foreman, Al," whispered Lefty. "You wanta stick to that hairpin. He'll do to ride the river with."

"I don't need a foreman." She patted his pillow into shape. "Now, go to sleep. Doctor Caldwell ordered absolute rest."

"You gotta have a foreman!" he persisted.

"Have I?" She regarded him straightly. "Well, maybe.—I suppose you'll be riding back to the Border?"

Lefty could never remember feeling flustered before, but there was a magnetic mystery in her dark eyes that stirred him, sent the blood tingling through his veins. But he could only stare speechlessly.

Alice turned abruptly away.

Pain forgotten, he thrust out his uninjured left arm, grasped her wrist. "Set down, Al," he begged; "you got me all tangled up."

Obediently, she sank down beside him.

He gulped, ran his tongue over dry lips. "Maybe I could stick around as foreman," he ventured.

"But I don't need a foreman," she smiled.

"Then dammit," he choked, "you gotta have a husband—how about me?"

She placed a soft hand against his cheek. "Feverish," she murmured thoughtfully; "perhaps delirious!"

"Gosh darn it, Al, quit skallyhootin'."

"You better go to sleep," she soothed. "You'll feel better later."

Defying red-hot pokers and a thunderous trip hammer, he hooked his left arm and circled her waist. Fiercely, he crushed her slim body against his chest.

"Lefty, you'll have a relapse!" she wailed.

His grasp tightened, and her resistance was singularly ineffective. "Do I get me a wife?" he demanded.

Suddenly, she relaxed and cradled her head against his good shoulder. "You do!" she whispered, then gently wriggled free. "You really must rest, dear," she insisted, "or I'll never get a husband."

His blue eyes followed her as she tripped happily out of the room. At the door, a chuckle from the bed brought her head round with quick solicitude. "I'm thinkin' Lobo couldn't have left me a better legacy if he robbed the whole danged Valley," he explained.

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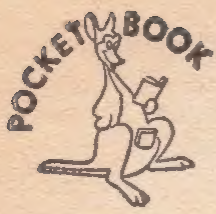
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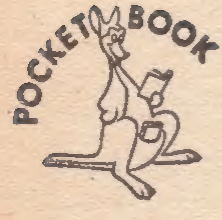
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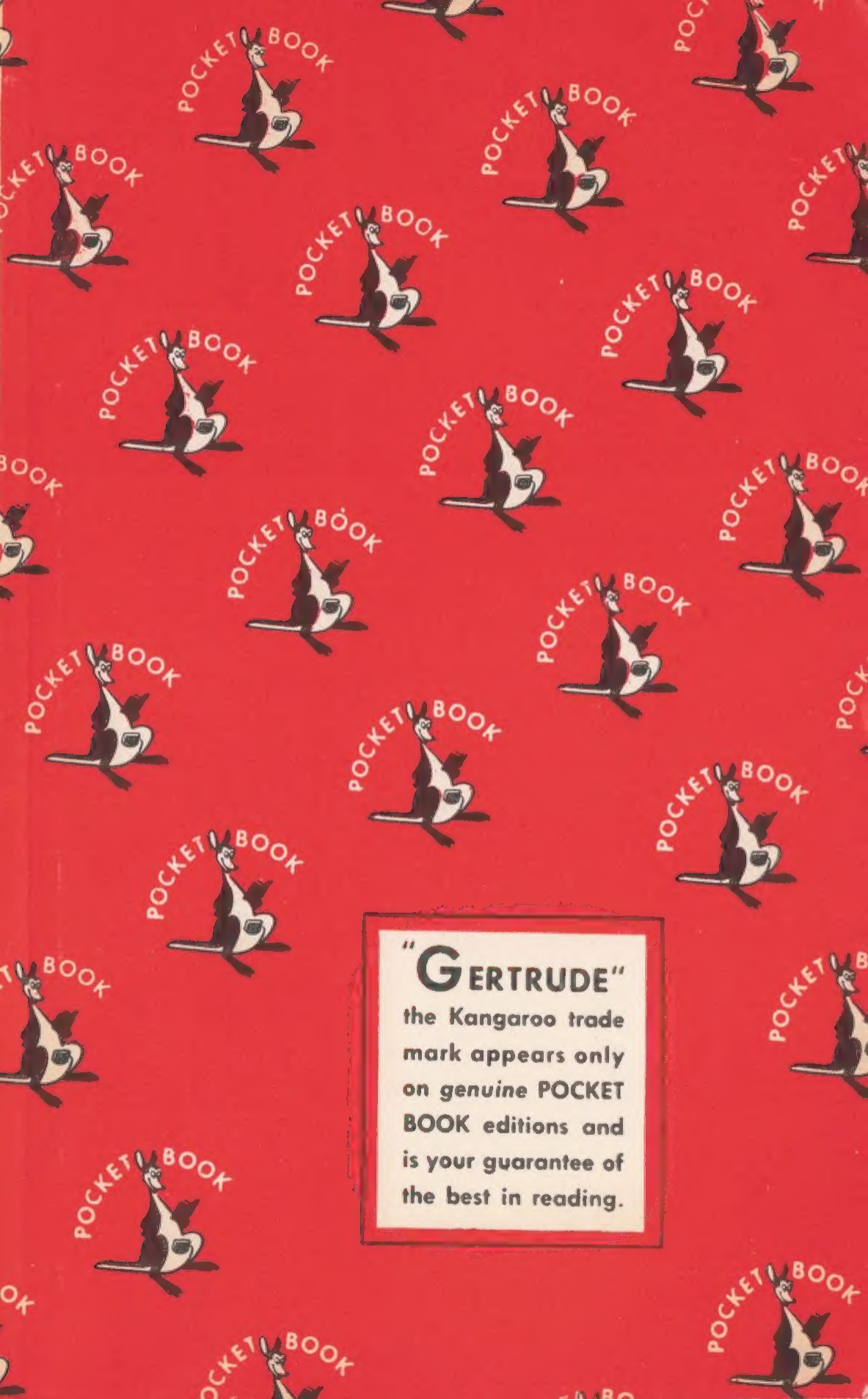

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When the sheriff appeared, a bystander informed him, "Saw the jasper plain as day."

"Place him?" the sheriff snapped.

"Shore – it was Lefty Lingren."

The Circle L had changed during Lefty Lingren's absence. His father had been bushwhacked; and "neighbors" were picking off the choicest parts of the ranch. Lefty drew iron to reclaim his own, but found himself pegged as buzzard bait by his enemies and bank robber by the law.

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